

# LYMPHEDEMA THERAPY SOURCE

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## Lymphedema Risk Reduction: Protecting Your Lymphatic System

### What Is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is swelling caused by a reduced ability of the lymphatic system to transport fluid. It may occur after lymph node removal, radiation therapy, cancer treatment, trauma, infection, or because of an inherited lymphatic condition. Although lymphedema cannot always be prevented, healthy habits can help reduce the risk of worsening swelling, infections, and complications.

### Key Principles

#### 1. Protect Your Skin

Healthy skin is your body's first defense against infection. Do:

- Keep skin clean and dry.
- Apply moisturizer daily to prevent cracking and dryness.
- Use sunscreen and insect repellent when outdoors.
- Wear gloves for gardening, cleaning, yard work, and household projects.
- Use caution when shaving to avoid cuts.
- Treat scratches, cuts, and insect bites promptly with soap and water.

Call your healthcare provider immediately if you notice:

- Redness
- Warmth
- Increased swelling
- Fever or chills
- New pain or tenderness

These may be signs of cellulitis, a serious skin infection.

#### 2. Avoid Infection

Infection increases the workload of the lymphatic system and can worsen lymphedema.

Reduce your risk by:

- Practicing good hand hygiene.
- Treating athlete's foot or fungal infections promptly.
- Protecting feet with properly fitting shoes.
- Maintaining good nail care.
- Avoiding cutting cuticles.

#### 3. Maintain a Healthy Weight

Excess body weight is one of the strongest known risk factors for developing and worsening lymphedema. Aim to:

- Follow a balanced diet.
- Stay physically active.
- Work with your healthcare provider if weight loss is recommended.

Even modest weight reduction may improve symptoms and reduce progression.

#### 4. Stay Active

Movement helps stimulate lymphatic flow.

Recommended activities include:

- Walking

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- Swimming
- Cycling
- Yoga
- Tai Chi
- Stretching
- Progressive strengthening exercises

## Exercise tips:

- Start slowly and progress gradually.
- Monitor for increased swelling, heaviness, or discomfort.
- Wear prescribed compression garments (unless swimming; if swimming, put them on after)
- Stop and seek guidance if symptoms worsen.

Current evidence supports appropriately supervised resistance and strengthening exercise for most individuals with lymphedema.

## 5. Avoid Overuse and Injury

Sudden, intense, or repetitive activity can temporarily increase swelling.

### Helpful strategies:

- Increase activity gradually.
- Take rest breaks.
- Use proper body mechanics.
- Avoid carrying heavy loads for prolonged periods.
- Listen to your body's warning signs.

## 6. Use Compression as Directed

Compression garments help support lymphatic function in many people with lymphedema.

### Remember:

- Wear garments exactly as prescribed.
- Replace garments when they become stretched or worn.
- Contact your therapist if your garment feels too loose, too tight, or uncomfortable.
- Not everyone needs compression for every activity. Follow your individualized treatment plan.

## 7. Avoid Prolonged Limb Constriction

### Whenever possible:

- Avoid tight jewelry, watches, or clothing.
- Avoid tight elastic bands around the affected area.
- Ensure blood pressure cuffs and medical devices are used thoughtfully when appropriate.

In emergencies, necessary medical care should never be delayed.

## 8. Be Cautious With Heat and Cold

Extreme temperatures may increase swelling or cause tissue injury.

### Avoid:

- Burns
- Frostbite
- Prolonged hot tubs or cold dips
- Heating pads directly on affected areas
- Excessive sun exposure

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Use common sense and protect your skin from temperature extremes.

## 9. During Travel

Travel may involve prolonged sitting and reduced movement.

Helpful tips:

- Change positions regularly.
- Walk periodically during long trips.
- Perform ankle pumps and gentle exercises.
- Stay hydrated.
- Discuss compression use during air travel with your lymphedema therapist.

## 10. Avoid Prolonged Sitting or Standing

Especially for leg lymphedema:

- Move frequently.
- Avoid remaining in one position for long periods.
- Elevate your legs when appropriate.
- Take walking breaks throughout the day.

## When Should I Seek Medical Attention?

Contact your healthcare provider promptly if you experience:

- Sudden increase in swelling
- Redness or warmth
- Fever or chills
- New pain
- Skin breakdown
- Leakage of fluid from the skin
- Changes in garment fit
- New heaviness, tightness, or decreased function

Remember, lymphedema management is lifelong.

The most effective approach combines:

- ✓ Skin care
- ✓ Infection prevention
- ✓ Exercise and movement
- ✓ Weight management
- ✓ Compression when prescribed
- ✓ Early treatment of problems

Small daily habits can make a significant difference in protecting your lymphatic health.

## References

National Lymphedema Network (NLN) Risk Reduction Position Papers

Foldi's Textbook of Lymphology

*Note: The NLN emphasizes that many risk-reduction strategies are based on clinical experience and lymphatic physiology. There is little research that prove these. One reason is likely potential harm to a patient.*

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