

## Everything You Wish You Had Known...about lymphedema

Lymphedema (LE) is a circulatory drainage issue that can be caused by damage or loss of lymph nodes from surgery or radiation. It can occur immediately during treatment or at any time during the rest of our lives. There's no way to predict who will develop it. LE is typically seen to affect a limb but it can also affect just a breast or some or all of the trunk area.

Your surgeon and/or radiation oncologist may or may not mention this risk to you, but in order to recognize it, you need to know to look for it. Early treatment is the best way to control it and minimize the damage it can cause. Providence offers free monthly classes on lymphedema

(<https://providencealaska.netreturns.biz/Calendar/CalendarItemDetail.aspx?Id=3cf72aea-29c7-42b5-84b5-f808316a0e9a>) taught by certified lymphedema therapists. You can watch a pair of educational videos

(<https://klosetraining.com/course/online/strength-abc/lymphedema-education-session/>) offered by one of the therapist certification companies or you can read an article on "Lymphedema: The Basics" at

<https://www.oncolink.org/support/side-effects/lymphedema/lymphedema-what-you-need-to-know/lymphedema-the-basics> .

If you're in doubt as to whether swelling is just a result of treatment or is actually LE, see a lymphedema specialist. It takes trained and certified lymphedema therapists to help you develop and begin a LE treatment plan. The staff at Providence Oncology Rehab are LE-certified, but other independent therapists also are available in the area. This should be covered by insurance or Medicare but you need to check your policy.

Treatment typically involves learning a manual drainage technique to help move fluid along. This is better learned from an actual therapist than a YouTube video because the therapist can help you explore which directions the fluid needs to be moved from the actual area involved in your LE.

Treatment may also involve wearing compressive garments to slow fluid return to affected areas. Most of these are insurance-reimbursed only once, even though they must be replaced after every six months of use due to loss of specially-calibrated elasticity. There are many brands of compressive garments and ones that show in public, like sleeves, are available in colors and prints if you shop around. There are also some retail garments such as Ruby Ribbon (<https://www.rubyribbon.com/Pws/homeoffice/store/AM/product/Original-Full-Support-Cami,1044,216.aspx>) that may be useful with LE of the trunk.

A third additional treatment technique that may be prescribed by your LE therapist involves specially-shaped and quilted pads that also promote drainage. These can be purchased commercially or, if you need a nonstandard shape, tailored.

Wearing compressive garments (and, possibly, quilted pads) is often recommended for any airline flight lasting much over three hours (ie: anything further than Seattle). Ask your therapist for details on how this applies to your own situation. On super-long flights/trips, you may need to do some extra manual drainage along the way. If possible, don't wear your quilted pads through Security but carry them to put on once you're cleared.

If your LE drainage routine involves difficult-to-reach areas on your back, try an extra-large silicone spatula or a knobby silicone pot handle grip (available online and in many housewares sections) on a paint-stirring stick (the kind for a 5-gallon bucket, from Home Depot) to extend your reach.

The "Everything You Wish You Had Known" series is available at <http://www.womenlisten.org>

Restricting fluids or taking “water pills” will not help LE. In fact, it’s better to hydrate well to keep the protein-rich lymph fluid from becoming more concentrated.

Injury or infection of the vulnerable area can cause LE to develop or worsen, so wearing long sleeves and gloves or long pants and socks outdoors can lower our risk. Ditto avoiding bug bites or sunburns. Avoid tight clothing or accessories (like a heavy purse carried on a LE shoulder). Don’t push your muscular effort with a LE limb beyond your usual level of conditioning—which includes using most power tools or reeling in The Big One.

Your LE therapist might suggest you switch from a razor to an electric shaver if you shave affected areas to avoid tiny nicks that can provide an entry to infection. Ask, if this pertains and they don’t offer the information.

If you have LE, do not allow an affected limb to be used for blood pressure readings, IVs, blood draws, injections, or other procedures. If you have a high risk for LE, ask your surgeon or therapist whether these same precautions apply to you. Women who have had breast cancer surgery or radiation, for example, are typically considered ones who need to follow this precaution. You may want to wear a medic-alert bracelet.

Extreme heat can trigger or worsen LE, so hot weather is a time for extra vigilance and care. If you already have LE, you will probably be told you need to avoid hot tubs, saunas, hot baths, hot springs.

Swimming is not expressly forbidden with LE, but your risk rises if the water is not fully clean or contains micro-organisms that can cause infection. Wearing rash-guard garments may help provide some protection, as does showering with soap immediately after getting out.

If you notice your hand(s) swelling when hiking, use of walking poles may help pump the fluid along.

It used to be recommended that you should never lift anything more than a few pounds or exercise a LE limb. Research (<https://www.oncolink.org/blogs/2010/12/physical-activity-lymphedema-pal-trial/>) has shown that *gradual* weight training (such as offered by Prov Oncology Rehab) actually has a protective effect by avoiding damaging strain.

Small infections can quickly get out of control in LE tissues. If you do a lot of back-country travel, you may want to ask your family doctor for a prescription for oral antibiotics to carry along in case you develop an infection when it will take you more than a day to reach a health care provider. Be sure you also ask them about how to recognize an infection or early signs of cellulitis. Packing an antiseptic soap and ointment in your kit for prompt first aid can help prevent a small wound from turning into an infection that requires treatment. Remember to use purified drinking water, not stream water, for washing any wounds.