

Stage 0

Lymphedema begins to develop deep within the tissues and can progress very slowly. Early changes happen without obvious, noticeable swelling; however, the fluid congestion causes sensations such as tightness, heaviness, or diffuse tingling in the at-risk limb. Despite the normal appearance of the limb, there may be sub-clinical changes occurring that can be measured and identified. Responding to changes in this early stage can help to prevent the onset of the condition. Special imaging or other lymphatic technology is required for diagnosis in this stage.

Stage 1

In this early stage, swelling may or may not be present all the time. Swelling may come and go intermittently. When swelling is present, the skin will 'pit', meaning that the area indents with pressure and holds the indentation. Elevation of the swollen limb provides relief and reduction in the swelling. It is important to seek treatment for lymphedema management at this early stage to help to prevent the condition from becoming progressively more swollen.

Stage 2

In this stage, the tissue now has obvious signs of stagnant swelling that do not go away with elevation. The tissue will be firmer and show signs of less pitting. The tissue consistency change is caused by the formation of fibrosis. Fibrosis is the scarring of the tissue due to the prolonged presence of stagnant lymph. This marks the beginning of the hardening of the limb and progressively more aggressive swelling. Seeking treatment at this stage will help to reduce limb volume and improve tissue. The treatment will be more intensive and will require more vigilant follow-up to maintain the swelling.

Stage 3

At this stage, the tissue becomes very hard (fibrotic) and may begin to develop thickening on the surface of the skin. Excess skin forms on the limb and there is greater potential for open, seeping areas. Due to the high concentration of lymph fluid, the swollen limb(s) becomes an ideal culture medium for bacteria to thrive and recurrent infections may be common. Moreover, untreated lymphedema can lead to decrease or loss of functioning of the limb(s), skin breakdown, chronic infections and sometimes irreversible complications. Treatment can still be beneficial at this stage and can have an impact on tissue softening and decongestion of the swelling.

These stages represent the natural progression of lymphedema when the condition is left untreated. At any stage, lymphedema can be treated, and the progression halted and, in some instances, reversed.

The importance of early identification and early management should be stressed.

UPPER BODY

Lymphatic Drainage Exercises for Cancer



BREATHING

One of the most important and often over-looked components of exercise is breathing. Not only does breathing allow precious oxygen to be circulated through the bloodstream, but it is also effective for moving fluid through a gentle pumping action of the abdominal muscles. The fluid is pumped through the central lymphatic vessel in the chest cavity, stimulating the flow of lymph. When you breathe in, using your abdominal muscles, the pressure in the chest cavity changes, because the belly breath moves your diaphragm.

PELVIC TILT

Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Tilt your hips so that you are able to press the small of your back against the floor. Pause for several seconds then release the contraction. Repeat 5-10 times.



MODIFIED SIT-UP

Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Keep your neck in neutral and your chin pointing to the ceiling. As you exhale, lift up your chest and shoulders, pausing when you feel your abdominal muscles tighten up. Slowly lower yourself back to starting position (trying not to rest between repetitions). Repeat as many times as you can comfortably.

NECK STRETCHES

Begin by standing or sitting erect. Exhale and turn your head slowly to the right, looking over your shoulder. Inhale as you return to center. Repeat this to the left. Next, tilt your head to the right, allowing your chin to drop toward your shoulder. Maintain this position for 15-30 seconds, breathing regularly. Slowly bring your head back to center. Repeat this to the left. Finally, tilt your head to the right, allowing your ear to drop toward your shoulder. Maintain this position for five seconds, breathing regularly. Slowly bring your head back to center. Repeat to the left.



SHOULDER SHRUGS

Shrug both shoulders, lifting them towards your ears as you inhale. Exhale, and return to a relaxed position. Next, exhale and press your shoulders down as far as possible, pause. Inhale and return to the relaxed position. Repeat 5-10 times.



SHOULDER ROLLS

Lift your shoulders up to your ears then rotate your shoulders back and down, making a smooth, continuous motion. Repeat 5-10 times. Repeat in the other direction.

SHOULDER BLADE SQUEEZE

Bend your elbows to a right angle, parallel to the floor. Exhale and pull them towards the center of your back. Squeezing the shoulder blades together, pause, inhale and return to starting position. Repeat 5-10 times.



ISOMETRIC CHEST PRESS

Place the palms of your hands together, with the elbows bent and arms parallel to the floor at shoulder level. Exhale and push your hands firmly together. Pause, inhale and relax. Repeat 5-10 times.

SHOULDER CIRCLES

Hold your arms at shoulder height, parallel to the floor, with palms facing down make small circles forward and then backward 6-8 times in each direction. Repeat 5-10 times.



WRIST CIRCLES

Rotate your fists in small circles, isolating the movement to the wrist only. Repeat 5-10 times in one direction, then in the other.

WRIST FLEXION AND EXTENSION

Bend your wrist towards you, then away from you, isolating the movement to the wrist only. Repeat 5-10 times.



FIST CLENCH

Open your hands and stretch your fingers, spreading them apart. Then slowly clench each hand to make a fist. Hold for five seconds, breathing regularly, and release. Repeat 5-10 times.

LOWER BODY

Lymphatic Drainage Exercises for Cancer



BICYCLES

Lie on your back with your knees bent at ninety degrees (shins are parallel to the floor). Maintain a neutral pelvis and keep your upper body relaxed on the floor. Raise your legs towards the ceiling, keeping the legs bent at about 45 degrees. Circle your legs like a bicycle 5-10 times in each direction.

LEG CIRCLES

Lie on your back with left knee bent and foot on floor; right leg extended up toward the ceiling. Engage your abdominal muscles and "anchor" your hips to the floor as you perform clockwise and counter-clockwise hip circles, using very small and controlled movements, 5-10 times in each direction. Repeat the entire process on the other leg.



KNEE FLEXION/EXTENSION

Lie on your back with both legs extended up toward the ceiling. Bend and extend your legs 5-10 times at the knees.

PLANTAR/DORSI FLEXION

Lie on your back with both legs extended up toward the ceiling. Point and flex your feet at the ankle joint 5-10 times.



FOOT CIRCLES

Lie on your back with both legs extended up toward the ceiling. Perform clockwise and counter-clockwise circles with both feet 5-10 times.



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WHAT IS LYMPHEDEMA?

Lymphedema occurs when lymph nodes are surgically removed or damaged by radiation as part of cancer treatment. As lymph nodes are removed or damaged, it becomes more difficult for the lymph fluid to flow through the body. Lymph fluid begins to accumulate in the tissue under the skin, causing painful inflammation and limited range of motion. Lymphedema is caused by this abnormal accumulation of lymph fluid. It is a chronic and progressive disease that continues to worsen over time when not treated.



All cancer treatment survivors are susceptible to developing lymphedema. It is a side effect that may occur within a few short weeks after surgery or radiation, or 15 to 20 years after treatment. Lymphedema is most likely to appear in the area that is closest to the lymph nodes that were removed or damaged.

The first sign of lymphedema is swelling in a specific area. Other symptoms may include a tightness or heaviness; thickening of the skin; limitation of movement; repeated infections; pain or tingling; and clothes or jewelry feel tighter.

GENERAL PRECAUTIONS TO AVOID OR MANAGE LYMPHEDEMA

- Avoid tight fitting jewelry on the affected arm or hand
- Avoid tight or restrictive clothing that may impair circulation
- Avoid wearing high heel shoes
- Do not wear socks, stockings, or undergarments with tight elastic bands
- Do not overheat – avoid saunas, whirlpools, steam rooms, and hot baths
- Keep the at-risk area meticulously clean and use lotion after bathing
- Use hypo-allergenic soaps and fragrances
- Avoid insect bites, burns, skin irritants, hangnails, and torn cuticles
- Avoid repetitive movements with affected limb
- Avoid lifting heavy objects
- Never carry heavy purses or shoulder bags on the side that is affected
- Use an electric razor when shaving
- Treat infections vigorously
- Travel with limb elevated
- Wear a well-fitted compression sleeve/stocking when flying
- Wear gloves while doing housework or gardening
- Don't have shots, blood draws, or blood pressure taken on affected limb
- Flexibility, strength, and aerobic exercise can enhance lymphatic flow
- Seek treatment for even the slightest lymphedema/swelling

The risk of lymphedema doesn't increase or decrease with time!

But it can be treated and well controlled!

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