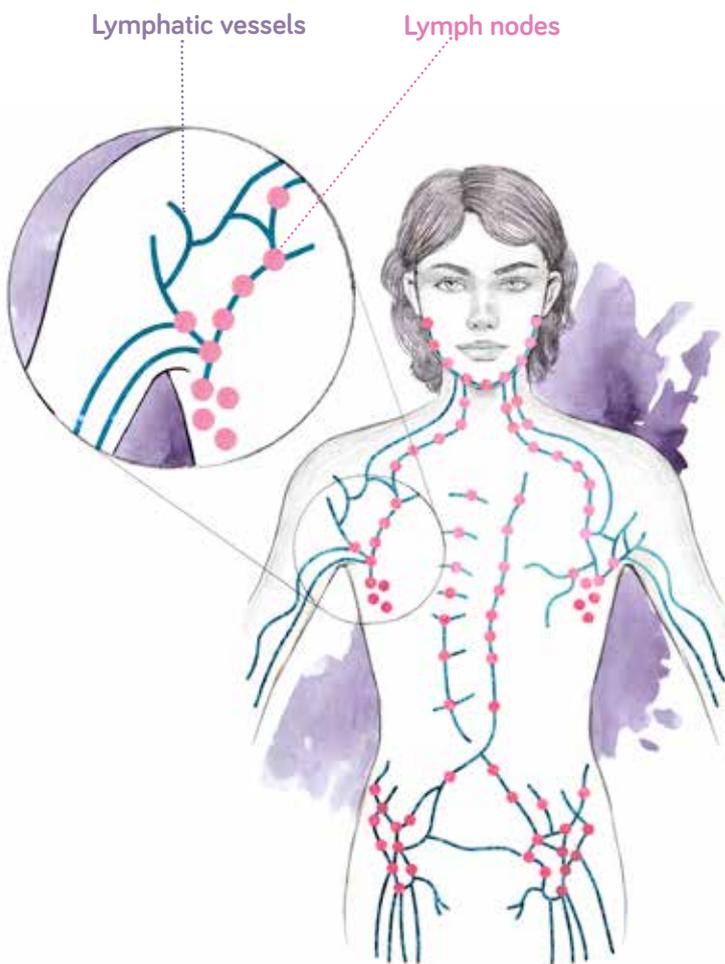


# Lymphoedema in Breast Cancer

Reduce  
Your  
Risk

# Lymphoedema in Breast Cancer

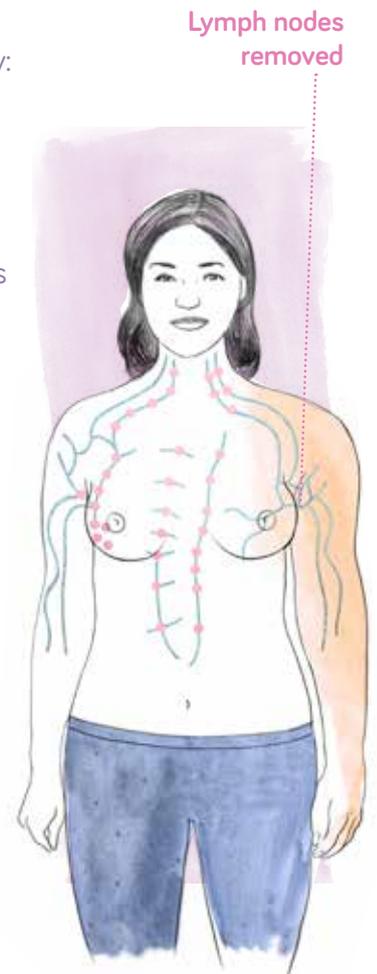
As part of breast cancer treatment, patients may need some or all lymph nodes removed from the axilla (underarm)



Lymph nodes play an important role in the body:

- They help to clear lymph fluid from the arm, chest and back
- They also produce infection fighting cells (lymphocytes)

When these nodes are removed there is a risk of developing a condition called lymphoedema in these areas



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## What is lymphoedema?

- Lymphoedema (lim-fo-dee-ma) is a chronic swelling that can occur in the arm, chest or back after breast cancer treatment

## What is my risk of getting lymphoedema?

- A mastectomy or lumpectomy alone does not typically lead to lymphoedema
- The most likely cause is removal of lymph nodes
- Radiotherapy can increase this risk
- Infection or injury in the 'at risk' area can trigger new lymphoedema or make existing lymphoedema worse
- Risk level is associated with the amount of nodes removed (less nodes removed = lower risk)
- Lymphoedema is a lifetime risk, which may present weeks, months or even years after surgery
- Around one third of people who undergo treatment for breast cancer develop lymphoedema

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## Signs of infection are swelling, heat, redness, itching, pain, fever, flu-like symptoms

### What do I do if....

#### ... I get a cut or break to the skin on my arm/chest/back?

- Because the fluid is high in protein this area is at a higher risk of infection
- Wash the area and put some antiseptic cream/ointment on it
- Check the cut for signs of infection

#### ... I get an infection in this area?

If you get an infection in this area (arm/chest/back on the side of the lymph node removal) it is very important to go to your GP as you may need an antibiotic

## What are the signs of Lymphoedema?

You may notice some or all of the following....

- Swelling in the arm, chest or back. This can improve after a night's sleep but worsen as the day goes on. Some of the first signs may be clothes or jewellery getting tight or the area looking larger than the other side
- Swelling can be hard or soft depending on how long it is present
- Thickening and dryness of the skin
- Sensation of fullness and heaviness
- Tightness or stretching of the skin
- Discomfort when using the arm for everyday tasks

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## What do I do if I think I have signs of lymphoedema?

If you notice some or all of these signs contact the centre where you received your treatment

You will need to be assessed by a Certified Lymphoedema Therapist with a recognised qualification

### Treatment is painless and can include:

- Advice & Education
- Self-Massage
- Manual Lymphatic Drainage (very light massage)
- Multi-layer bandaging
- Compression Garment



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## Some useful tips on.....

### Temperature

- Avoid extremes of temperature
- In particular avoid saunas, steam rooms, jacuzzis, very hot baths, tanning salons or heat treatments in this area
- In hot weather drink plenty of water and seek the shade when possible

### Flying

- If you are going on a flight, it can help to wear a compression sleeve
- If you do this, make sure it is recently measured to fit your arm
- There are arm exercises you can do when flying  
Squeezing a stress ball during flights is useful
- Drink plenty of water and avoid salty food and alcohol

**Once it is well managed, you should be able to live a normal, active life**



# Reduce Your Risk

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## How do I reduce my risk of developing lymphoedema?

### Skin Care

- Avoid having injections, drips, pin pricks, blood taken or blood pressure measured on the affected arm or that side of the chest
- Apply moisturiser daily, especially to hands to avoid dryness and skin breaks around nails
- Use a high factor sunscreen on your skin always (even in Ireland)
- If you have a manicure, ask the therapist not to cut your cuticles (skin around your nails) on the affected arm
- Only use a cream or an electric razor to remove underarm hair (don't use a wet razor or wax)
- Avoid deep massage to the area
- Wear gloves if working with harsh chemicals, tools, wire wool, gardening or using the oven
- Try to avoid insect bites – use strong insect repellent on this side
- Be careful around pets – try to avoid being scratched or bitten by them

### Useful Exercises



Holding both hands at chest level start opening and closing both fists (in a vigorous pumping action) continuously as you move both arms to reach up over your head and continue pumping to return to chest level



Holding both hands in a fist at chest level, alternate arms to punch the air by reaching up over your head in a slow motion and then returning your arm to chest level and repeating with the other arm

If you have any concerns when exercising seek advice of your Chartered Physiotherapist or GP

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## It is important to maintain a healthy body weight and keep active



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## Exercise

- Starting or getting back to exercise is very important and helps lymphatic drainage thereby reducing your risk
- Remember the recommended activity level is 30 minutes a day, most days of the week
- You can build up to your 30 minutes per day by exercising in shorter sessions of at least 10 minutes per session and you will get the same benefit
- You should aim to be exercising at a moderate intensity level which means you should be just about able to hold a conversation as you are exercising. This can be any type of aerobic exercise including walking, dancing, running, swimming
- It is important to progress exercise in a slow, gradual fashion thereby steadily improving the ability of the upper extremity to do more intense exercise
- Any exercise is good and swimming is especially helpful in risk reduction

## Other

- Avoid wearing tight clothes or jewellery on this side
- Drink plenty of water
- Maintain a healthy bodyweight for your height as being overweight increases your risk of developing lymphoedema

## Remember the good news!

- Lymphoedema is not life threatening
- You can play an active role in reducing your risk
- It can be managed
- Treatment is not painful
- Around two thirds of people who have nodes removed never develop lymphoedema
- Once it is well managed, you should be able to live a normal, active life



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