

Lymphedema Treatment, Information for Patients

What is the lymphatic system?

The lymphatic system is a major part of the immune system, which fights disease and infection in the body.

The lymphatic system makes and moves lymph fluid around the body. The lymphatic system has three jobs:

- Remove extra fluid from body tissues.
- Absorb fat and move it to the blood.
- Defend the body against disease by making white blood cells.

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is swelling, most often in the arms or legs. It happens when the lymphatic system does not drain properly. The fluid cannot be moved out of the arm or leg efficiently, causing swelling.

Lymphedema may affect just one arm or leg, or it may occur in both arms or both legs.

The lymph fluid is full of protein, which makes lymphedema hard to treat. The protein acts as a magnet for more fluid, which causes more swelling. This static swelling encourages infection.

What causes lymphedema?

There are two types of lymphedema: Primary and Secondary.

- People are born with primary lymphedema. It may be seen at birth or later during puberty or adulthood.
- Secondary lymphedema is more common and is caused by an injury or disease. For example, surgery or radiation therapy may injure the lymphatic system.

Lymphedema often happens after surgery when lymph nodes are removed or after radiation therapy. It can appear weeks, months or even years after the surgery. It is not always clear why some people have swelling while others do not.

Does lymphedema go away?

Although there are cases when lymphedema has suddenly gone away and not come back, most patients always have it and need long-term management.

How is lymphedema treated?

The physical therapist will evaluate you and create a treatment plan. It may include one or more of the following:

- **Skin care** – Avoid injury and infection. Practice good hygiene, and put on moisturizing lotion. We will teach you how to care for your skin.
- **Massage** – Two basic types of massage are used to treat lymphedema:
 - Manual lymph draining is a precise and gentle form of massage that helps move the fluid to other parts of the body.
 - Soft tissue mobilization (or myofascial release) is a type of massage used to loosen scar tissue and other tightness that might contribute to the swelling. Sometimes massage is taught to patients or family members to do at home.
- **Exercise** – You may be referred to Baptist MD Anderson’s Rehabilitation Services. They can teach you how to do stretching exercises to loosen up the tissues in the area or special exercises to help move the fluid. You will get written instructions for these exercises.
- **Bandaging** – Cotton, low-stretch bandages apply constant pressure on the limb. Bandaging is usually combined with other methods of treatment.
- **Compression garments** – Elastic fabric garments, similar to a girdle or support stocking, put pressure on the arm or leg to help move fluid and keep new fluid from collecting.
- **Medicine** – Sometimes doctors prescribe antibiotics or other medicines as part of the treatment plan.
- **Surgery** – For many patients, surgery may help treat lymphedema.

Frequently Asked Questions About Surgery for Lymphedema

How are Baptist MD Anderson doctors treating lymphedema with surgery?

Doctors at Baptist MD Anderson do the following procedures to treat lymphedema:

- Lymphaticovenular bypass, which redirects the lymph fluid to small veins
- Vascularized lymph node transfer, which promotes new lymphatic vessels to grow

Lymphaticovenular Bypass

The doctor makes multiple small cuts (incisions) about 1-inch-long in the affected arm or leg. The hospital stay is less than 24 hours.

Lymph node Transfer

Using microsurgery, the doctor removes lymph nodes from your neck or groin area and then reattaches them in the affected arm or leg. The hospital stay is usually about four days.

Both procedures allow for improved drainage, which can lessen the lymphedema. Your doctor can talk with you about which procedure he or she recommends.

Who may have this procedure?

Please ask your doctor about the surgery. Patients who have had less severe lymphedema for a shorter time tend to have better results.

What should I expect from this procedure?

Many patients improve; however, every patient is different. The surgery does not help every patient. Do not expect a complete cure.

What does this procedure involve?

The procedure takes about four to six hours while under general anesthesia.

What care would I need after surgery?

The arm or leg is wrapped loosely with a bandage, which needs to be changed daily for about four weeks. There is usually little pain, and you may have to limit some of your activities or movement after the surgery. After four weeks, a compression stocking can be worn and lymphedema therapy can resume.

What are the risks?

As with any surgery, there are risks such as infection. Your doctor will talk with you about all of the risks.

What are disadvantages of this procedure?

The procedure may not help the lymphedema, and you will have small, permanent scars.

What are advantages of this procedure?

The procedure may help lessen the effects of lymphedema and keep it from getting worse. You may have fewer problems with pain, heaviness and infection.

Would I still need lymphedema treatment after surgery?

Although you may improve surgery, continue treatment to get the best result. For example, wear the compression garment, have massages, care for your skin and exercise.

Has anyone researched this procedure?

Yes, there are many published articles about this procedure. Two examples are:

1. Becker C, Assouad J, Riquet M, Hidden G. Postmastectomy lymphedema: long-term results following microsurgical lymph node transplantation. *Ann Surg.* 2006;243(3):313-315.
2. Chang DW. Lymphaticovenular bypass for lymphedema management in breast cancer patients: a prospective study. *Plast Reconstr Surg.* 2010;126(3):752-758.

Will my health insurance pay for this procedure?

This depends on the health insurance company.

Patient Education



More Resources

National Lymphedema Network

800-541-3259

www.lymphnet.org