

WHAT IS LYMPHEDEMA?

Have you undergone **breast cancer treatment**?

Do you have **scars** from burns, radiation, injuries, or surgery?

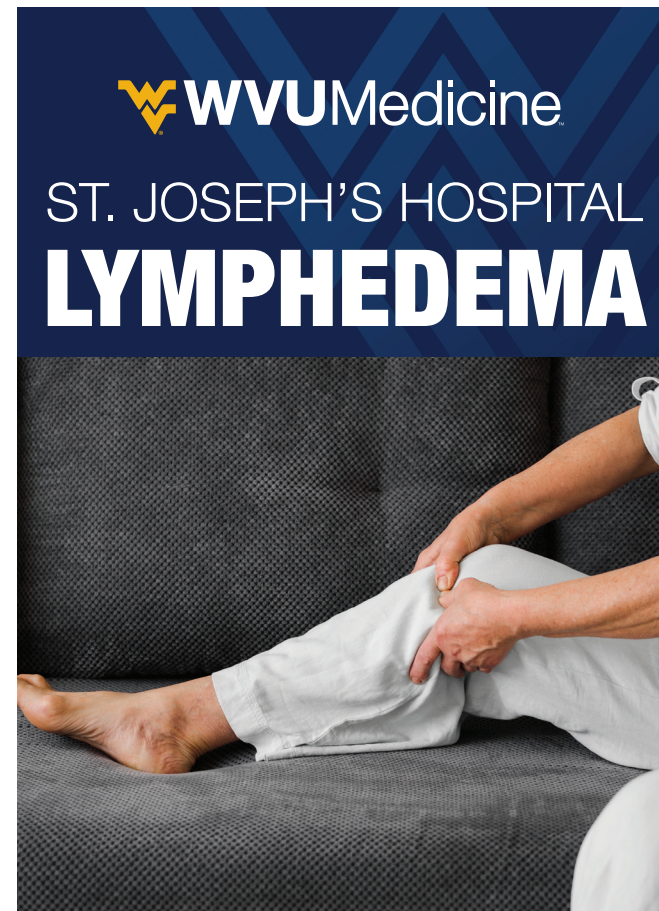
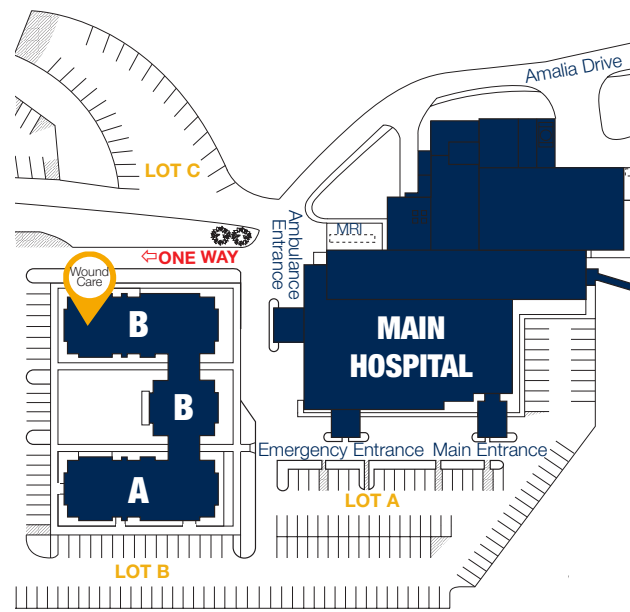
Do you experience **discomfort, tingling, swelling, limited movement, heaviness of the arm or leg, or pain** due to poor circulation?

Lymphedema is an abnormal swelling that can develop in the arm, hand, breast, leg, or torso on the side where there is damage to the lymphatic system. For example-when lymph nodes are removed as part of breast cancer treatment. About 20% of breast cancer survivors develop lymphedema.

Lymphedema develops when the lymph vessels in an area are no longer able to carry all the fluid away from the area. If this happens, the fluid can build up and cause swelling. It can develop suddenly or gradually, soon after surgery or months later.

The following things can damage your lymphatic system:

- Radiation therapy to your armpit
- An infection after surgery
- Severe injury to your surgical area or the affected arm (such as a serious burn or wound)
- Tumor growth
- Weight gain after treatment, or being overweight



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If left untreated, lymphedema can lead to serious infections.

Signs and symptoms:

- Full sensation in the limb(s)
- Tight skin
- Decreased hand, wrist, or ankle flexibility
- Difficulty fitting into clothing

3 STAGES OF LYMPHEDEMA

1 STAGE 1 (MILD LYMPHEDEMA)

During this phase, tissue is still in the pitting stage. When you press an area with your finger, it indents and holds the indentation briefly. Usually, when you wake in the morning, the area looks normal. As the day progresses, the swelling can occur.

2 STAGE 2 (MODERATE LYMPHEDEMA)

The tissue now has a spongy consistency and is non-pitting. When pressed, the tissue bounces back without any indentation. Fibrosis (formation of fibrous tissue) begins in this stage, marking the beginning of limb hardening and notable swelling.

3 STAGE 3 (SEVERE LYMPHEDEMA)

At this stage, the swelling is irreversible, and the affected area grows large. The tissue feels hard (fibrotic) and unresponsive.

Information adapted from the National Lymphedema Network, accessed via www.lymphnet.org and United Hospital Center.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

To treat lymphedema, therapists move accumulated fluid out of the affected areas through a process called **complete decongestive therapy** (CDT). It is based on compression bandaging, exercise, and manual lymph drainage, which is a form of massage that consists of rhythmic strokes that stimulate lymphatic vessels to contract and encourage lymph flow.

Skin care is also an important part of CDT. If skin isn't maintained, lesions can develop and allow bacteria to enter an already immune-compromised system. This produces additional lymph system destruction. However, CDT treatment helps maintain skin. Swelling usually decreases in four to 14 treatments over two to four weeks. To further reduce swelling in the arms, patients wear compression garments.

PREVENTION

With proper care, lymphedema can be prevented.

INFECTION

- Keep your arms clean. Wash often if you perspire, but always dry your skin well so moisture does not remain in skin folds or between fingers.
- Protect your fingers, hands, and arms from punctures. Use your unaffected arm if you have blood drawn, your blood pressure taken, or need injections.
- Trim your nails carefully. Do not cut or tear the cuticles.
- Use an electric shaver under your arms so the skin is less likely to become injured.

MUSCLE STRAIN

- Use your affected arm as normally as possible, but avoid heavy lifting and vigorous pushing, pulling, or scrubbing.
- Ask your doctor, nurse, or physical therapist about the best exercise program.

BURNS

- Always wear protective clothing with sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher. If possible, stay out of the sun from 10 am to 3 pm.
- Avoid hot baths, saunas, and dishwasher.
- Wear oven mitts when cooking or baking.

CONSTRICTION

- Avoid anything that constrains your hands or arms, such as tight sleeves or cuffs, watchbands, or jewelry.
- Make sure your bra fits properly so that straps do not dig into your shoulders.

With proper education and care, you can recognize lymphedema's symptoms and seek treatment early. Talk to your therapist and learn more about how to avoid the condition.



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