

Edema in the Upper Body

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What is edema?

Edema is swelling caused by the build-up of fluid in the body tissues. This fluid, called lymph fluid, bathes all the cells in the body.

Normally, the lymph system (a network of nodes and vessels) removes any extra fluid and returns it to the bloodstream. But when part of the lymph system is damaged or doesn't work right, the fluid is not removed. Instead, it keeps building up until swelling occurs.

Swelling often appears in the arms, legs, face, neck or trunk. There is no cure for it, but it can be controlled.

There are two kinds of edema:

Primary edema is caused by a problem in the lymph system that is present at birth. The swelling may exist at birth or develop later in life. It is more common in the legs than in the arms. It occurs more often in females.

Secondary edema results from a known injury to the lymph system. It may be due to surgery, injury, scarring, chronic vein problems, radiation treatment, obesity (being very overweight) or repeated infections. Cancer patients who have their lymph nodes removed or radiated are at higher risk for edema. It may occur right after cancer therapy or many years later.

Your doctor may think you're at risk for edema, or you may already have it. In either case, you should ask to meet with a certified edema therapist.

What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms may be subtle: You may have a heavy, tight or full feeling in your arm or trunk, even though there is no visible swelling. Swelling may appear for a short time at the end of the day and go away by morning. The arm may tire more easily and feel achy.

Symptoms tend to get worse without treatment. The skin and soft tissues of the arm will lose their elasticity (ability to stretch) and may harden (fibrosis). Your chances of getting skin infections, such as cellulitis, increase.

If it is not treated, edema progresses in three stages:

- **Stage 1:** Swelling goes away after you rest with your arm raised for several hours.
- **Stage 2:** Swelling does not go away after raising your arm for several hours. The skin on the arm or upper body gets harder. You may have skin infections, increasing the risk that you will move to Stage 3.
- **Stage 3:** Extreme swelling, or "elephantiasis," may occur. The skin becomes thicker and may have wart-like bumps (called papillomas).

How can I prevent or control edema?

You may help prevent edema by following the guidelines below. If you already have it, these steps may keep your swelling from getting worse. But they cannot replace treatment by a certified therapist.

Take care of your skin

The extra fluid in your arm and upper body is a site where germs can easily multiply. Try to avoid any breaks in the skin such as cuts, insect bites, burns or scratches. A break in the skin can let germs into the body and put the swollen body part at risk for infection.

- If skin breaks occur, you must treat them quickly. Always wash cuts or injuries right away. Carry anti-bacterial cream (Neosporin, Polysporin, bacitracin) and Band-Aids to cover any wounds.
- Keep the arm and upper body clean and dry.
- Manicure your nails carefully. Use an emery board or clippers instead of scissors.
- Take extra care when shaving under your arm.
- Protect skin with sunscreen (at least 30 SPF) and insect repellent.
- Use scent-free, color-free soap and lotion, such as Nivea, Curel, Eucerin or Lubriderm. Put the lotion on right after bathing. Use it more often if you notice any dryness. Daily lotion will help prevent chapping or chaffing of the skin.
- If possible, do not allow shots, blood tests, skin tests, tattoos, body piercings, acupuncture or other procedures on your arm or chest.
- Wear a long oven mitt when taking dishes out of the oven.

- Wear rubber gloves when doing dishes or using household cleaners.
- Use a thimble when sewing by hand.
- Wear long sleeves and garden gloves for yard work.
- If you have an itch, do not scratch your skin. Instead, gently rub over the area with a cold, wet washcloth.
- Call your doctor at once if you notice any redness, pain, heat or swelling in your in your arm, hand or chest (even in small amounts), or if you have a fever.

Avoid extreme hot or cold

Heat will cause blood vessels to dilate (grow wider), which increases the amount of fluid in the tissues. Extreme cold will cause vessels to constrict (become narrow), which decreases the flow of fluid. Either can make swelling worse, though heat is often worse than cold.

- Avoid long, hot showers and baths. Stay away from saunas and hot tubs. Water above 102°F (38.9°C) may make swelling worse.
- Avoid exposing your arm to extreme cold (for example, an ice pack). This may cause rebound swelling and chapped skin.

Exercise safely

Exercise works well to help move the fluid back into your body. Just be careful not to overdo it.

- Do moderate exercise, but don't get overheated or too sweaty. Be sure to wear your bandages or compression garments during exercise, if you have them.
- Try to stay at a healthy body weight (BMI of 25 or less). To find your BMI, or Body Mass Index, go to https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm. Enter your height and weight, then click "Compute BMI."
- During and after exercise, check for any changes in how your arm looks or feels. If your arm begins to ache, raise it. You may want to place moist, cool towels on the arm.
- When first starting any new exercise, take it easy. Slowly increase the amount of time and energy you put into it.
- Rest often during physical activity. This will give your arm time to recover.

Don't restrict the flow of lymph fluid

If you restrict the flow of the lymph fluid, your arm is more likely to swell. If the arm is already swollen, restricting the flow may make the problem worse. Your doctor may want you to wear special bandages or compression garments. When properly fitted, these will not restrict the lymph fluid or blood flow.

- Wear loose-fitting clothing and jewelry. Avoid:
 - bras that cut into your shoulders or torso
 - sleeves that bind
 - clothes that are tight at the waist
 - watches and rings that are tight.
- Don't carry heavy purses or bundles with the arm. Use your other arm when lifting or carrying heavy objects.
- Change positions often. Don't let your arm hang down for long periods of time. Don't bend your elbow for long periods of time.
- Don't let anyone put a blood pressure cuff on the arm.
- When possible, rest with your arm raised. Try not to lie on the arm.
- Patients who have had a mastectomy (removal of a breast) may choose a light-weight breast prosthesis (a false breast that can be worn in a special bra).
- Avoid the use of a compression pump.

Practice healthy habits

- Don't over-tire your arm. If you have been using it a lot, take time to rest with the arm raised.
- Eat a healthy diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Avoid foods that are high in fat or salt.
- Don't smoke. Use alcohol in moderation.
- Drink 6 to 8 glasses of water each day to help flush out your system.
- Take extra care when flying. Air travel can increase swelling.
- Keep doing your normal activities as much as possible. Talk to your doctor or therapist if you are unsure about an activity.

How is edema treated?

Your therapist will use a series of treatments called Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT) This can greatly reduce the swelling in your upper body or help to decrease the risk of swelling. Treatments may include:

- **Manual lymphatic drainage**, or gentle massage-like treatment. This moves fluid from damaged areas to healthy areas where the lymph system works well.
- **Compression bandages** to help soften hard (fibrotic) tissue, reduce swelling and prevent fluid from building up again.
- **Exercises** that will help your lymph vessels work better. They will also move fluid out of the swollen arm and trunk.
- **Skin and nail care** to help prevent infections.
- **Compression garments** (special sleeves, gloves or other garments) to help prevent the build-up of fluid.
- **A home care program.** To help control your edema, your therapist will create a treatment program that meets your specific needs. It may include all or some of the treatments above.

Do I need an order to see a therapist?

Yes. An order is a prescription for therapy. Your order must come from a doctor who is licensed in Minnesota.

After we receive your order, you will have an evaluation by a physical or occupational therapist certified in Complete Decongestive Therapy.

For more information about our services, call your local Edema Treatment Center.

The Lymphatic System

