What Is Lymphedema?
Lymphedema is fluid buildup in an area because of damage to the lymph system. Many things can cause it. Most commonly it is a side effect of radiation therapy and certain cancer surgeries that remove lymph nodes.

When Does Lymphedema Occur?
It can occur days, months, or even years after radiation therapy and cancer surgery. Many things can trigger lymphedema. Examples include the following:
- Airplane travel
- Infection
- Insect bites
- Overuse or injury of the affected limb
- Sunburn

What Are the Signs of Lymphedema?
Common signs of lymphedema include the following:
- Aching or burning in legs or arms
- Pressure or tight sensation in the skin
- Heaviness or a sensation of fullness in the limb
- Indentation forms after the skin is firmly pressed
- Tightness of clothing that usually fits

Where Does Lymphedema Occur?
The area affected depends on what part of the body received treatment, but these are common areas:
- Fingers, hand, arm, or breast
- Toes, foot, or leg
- Face, neck, or abdomen

Ask your health care provider what areas you should watch for signs of lymphedema.

Should I Be Concerned about Lymphedema?
Yes. It is a serious condition and should not be ignored. If not treated, it can raise your risk of infection and may cause thickening or hardening of the skin. The affected limb may grow larger over time.

Even if you don't have lymphedema, you may have a lifelong risk if you had surgery to remove lymph nodes or had radiation therapy. Taking steps to prevent it is far better than trying to treat it once it has developed.

How Can I Prevent Lymphedema?
Talk with your lymphedema therapist to learn steps to take. Here are some examples:

Protect the affected limb
- Avoid cuts, scrapes, burns, and insect bites.
- Avoid blood pressure checks, blood draws, and injections.
- Avoid wearing tight clothing, watches, and jewelry.
- Watch for skin changes that could lead to infection.

General Self-Care
- Keep your skin and nails clean.
- Wear gloves if gardening and shoes when outdoors.
- Use neutral pH soaps to avoid drying the skin.
- Regularly apply lotion but avoid scented products.
- Use insect repellent and sunscreen when outdoors.
- Avoid extremes in temperature.
- Follow instructions for compression garments.

How Is Lymphedema Treated?
Complete decongestive therapy (CDT) is the standard treatment for lymphedema. It combines specialized massage, compression bandaging, and specific exercises to reduce swelling and to soften thickened skin. CDT has two phases: reduction and maintenance.

1. Reduction
This phase uses special massage to stimulate lymph vessels and direct fluid away from the area so it can be reabsorbed into the blood stream. These are also part of CDT reduction:
- Wrapping with special bandages to reduce swelling.
- Exercise to encourage lymph flow.
- Skin care measures to help prevent infections and other side effects of lymphedema.

2. Maintenance
This phase helps prevent lymphedema from coming back:
- Wear special elastic garments.
- Stay active with light exercise to help move fluid and keep muscles and joints healthy. Talk with your doctor or lymphedema therapist before you begin.
- Practice self-care techniques and massage.

To contact a lymphedema therapist, your health care team can refer you to the Lymphedema Management Program at Huntsman Cancer Institute or call 801-587-4091.