

Know Before You Go: A Question Guide to Lymphedema

In breast cancer treatment, some of the lymph nodes under your arm may be removed or exposed to radiation. When lymph nodes are removed or irradiated, the lymphatic system may become disrupted. This increases the risk of developing breast cancer–related lymphedema (BCRL), a condition characterized by chronic swelling in the arm or chest of the treated side. However, early detection and treatment can prevent lymphedema from becoming chronic and irreversible. Receiving patient education, screening, and routine monitoring from a certified lymphedema therapist (CLT) is associated with early detection and initiation of BCRL treatment.

You may not have heard of lymphedema or know what questions to ask your care team. Here are some questions to get the conversation started.

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What are my chances of developing lymphedema? Am I at an increased risk?

What are the signs of lymphedema? What is normal after surgery?

What do I do if I notice swelling in my arm? What other symptoms should I look for?

Should I avoid specific activities with the arm that had lymph nodes removed? (i.e. blood draws and shots)

What are my risks of developing an infection following treatment? What things can I do to prevent infections, including cellulitis?

How do I care for my skin after breast cancer treatment?

How do you determine if a lymph node is cancerous prior to removal?

How do you determine how many lymph nodes need to be removed? How many lymph nodes do you plan to remove?

Why might you remove lymph nodes that appear to be non-cancerous when it increases my risk of lymphedema?

Is it possible to minimize the number of lymph nodes removed while still ensuring effective treatment?

How is lymphedema treated?

Are there exercises or activities I can do to prevent lymphedema?

Am I a candidate for lymphaticovenous anastomosis (LVA) surgery or other preventative surgical options?

Do you recommend I get a compression sleeve?

Can you write me an order for a one-time visit with a certified lymphedema therapist (CLT) to get baseline limb volume measurements and additional patient education?

Next Steps

Request a baseline limb volume measurement from a CLT prior to breast cancer treatment

Get a CLT referral after breast cancer treatment, regardless of lymphedema symptoms

Create a survivorship care plan with your oncology team to address any physical and mental needs after cancer treatment