



## What Is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is a build-up of lymph fluid in the fatty tissues just under your skin. This build-up might also be called an obstruction and cause swelling and discomfort. It often happens in the arms or legs, but can also happen in the face, neck, trunk, abdomen (belly), and genitals. It's important to know that lymphedema can sometimes become severe and cause serious problems, and often is a long-term or chronic condition. This is why early and careful management is needed to help reduce symptoms and keep it from getting worse.

### What is the lymph system?

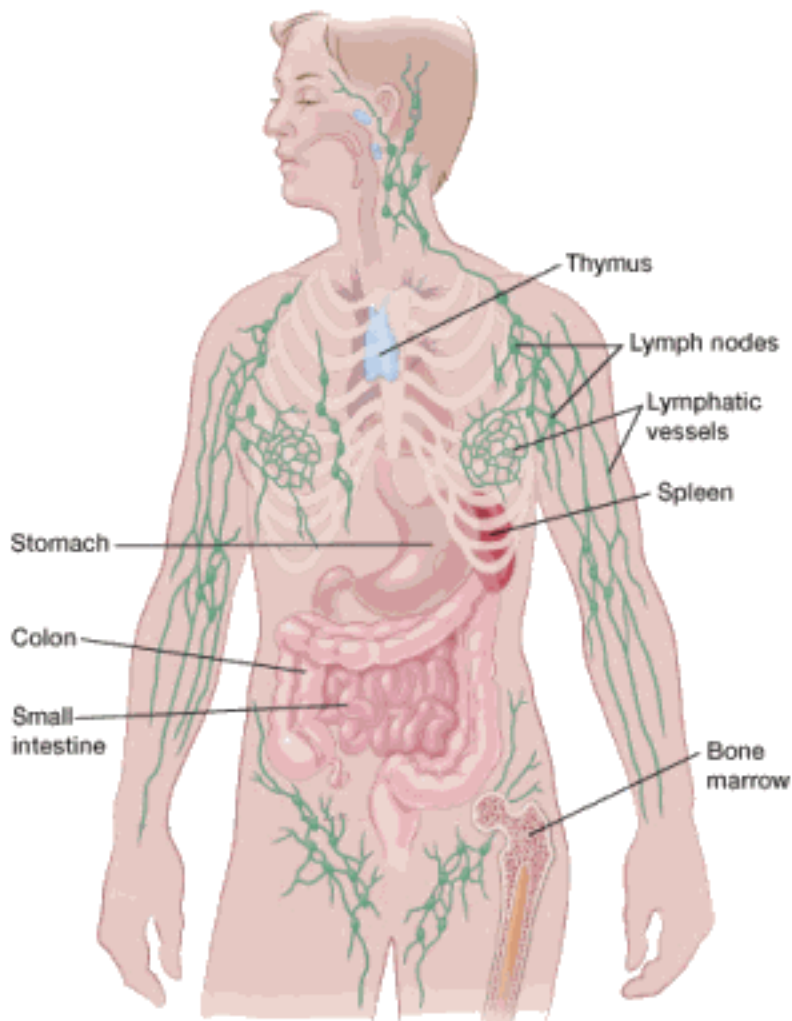
The lymph (or lymphatic) system is part of your body's immune system. It is a network of lymph nodes, ducts or vessels, and organs that work together to collect and carry clear lymph fluid through the tissues to the blood. This is much like how veins collect blood from distant parts of the body (like the hands and arms) and carry it back to the heart.

- Lymph fluid circulates through the body and contains proteins, salts, and water, as well as white blood cells, which help fight [infection](#)<sup>1</sup>.
- Lymph vessels or ducts have one-way valves that work with body muscles to help move the fluid through the body and control the flow.
- Lymph nodes are small, bean-like glands along the lymph vessels that work to help filter foreign substances, such as tumor cells and infections. Lymph nodes are located in many parts of the body, including the neck, armpit, chest, abdomen (belly), and groin.
- Tonsils, adenoids, spleen, and thymus are parts of the lymph system.

## How does lymphedema start?

For people with cancer, the build-up of lymph fluid can be caused by:

- [Cancer surgery](#)<sup>2</sup>, especially when lymph nodes are removed
- [Radiation therapy](#)<sup>3</sup> that can damage nearby tissue that might include lymph nodes or lymph vessels
- Infections that damage surrounding tissue or cause scarring
- Other health conditions, such as heart or vascular disease, arthritis, and eczema
- Gene changes or mutations that involve the lymph system
- Injury or trauma to a certain area of the body



## Hyperlinks

1. [www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/low-blood-counts/infections.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/low-blood-counts/infections.html)
2. [www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/surgery.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/surgery.html)
3. [www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/radiation.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/radiation.html)

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