

# Treating Lymphedema with Vascularized Lymph Node Transfer

*What to expect and how to prepare*

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*This handout explains what to expect, how to prepare, and how to plan for your recovery from vascularized lymph node transfer surgery.*

## What is lymphedema?

The *lymphatic* system is a network of tissues and organs that help remove toxins and waste from your body. It collects excess fluid from your tissues and deposits it in the bloodstream.

*Lymphedema* is tissue swelling that occurs when lymph fluid cannot drain into your blood.

## What is vascularized lymph node transfer?

*Vascularized lymph node transfer* (VLNT) is surgery that transplants lymph nodes to the area of lymphedema (recipient site) from a different area in the body (donor site). You will be admitted into the hospital after this surgery.

*Lymph nodes* are an important part of your lymphatic system. Lymph nodes work as small filters for foreign substances. They contain immune cells that can help fight infection.

Lymph nodes used for this transfer are called *donor lymph nodes*. They may be taken from your groin, chest, or neck, or other areas where there are extra nodes. In this procedure, transferred lymph nodes will help to remove lymph fluid and can support *lymphangiogenesis* (growth of lymphatic vessels).

## Compression Garments and Therapy

You may start wearing compression garments 4 weeks after your surgery. If you need a prescription for compression garments or have questions about where to get these, please ask your surgeon.

You may start physical therapy, massage, and using a compression pump 4 weeks after surgery.

## Incision Care and Healing

- You will have incisions at the donor site (where the lymph nodes were taken from) and at the recipient site (where the lymph nodes were placed).
- If your incision has strips of white tape (Steri-Strips) over it, leave these in place until they fall off. If they do not fall off on their own, we will remove them during your first follow up appointment.

## Hygiene

- Please take a shower 48 hours after surgery. We recommend daily showers to reduce the risk of infection.
- Use mild soap and wash your incisions very gently.
- Do not take a bath, sit in a hot tub, or go swimming until your incisions are fully healed and no scabs remain. This may take 4 to 6 weeks.

## Drains

- You will have a drain at the donor site (where the lymph nodes were taken from).
- If you had drains placed at the time of surgery, we will teach you how to care for them. Please read the handout “Caring for Your JP Drains.”

## Activities and Return to Work

- Elevate your arm or leg (on the surgical side) above the heart as much as possible to prevent swelling for 6 weeks after surgery.
- Do **not** fly for 2 weeks after surgery.
- For 6 weeks after surgery, avoid *aerobic exercise* (activities that cause heavy breathing or sustained elevated heart rate).
- Return to work varies from person to person and depends on the type of work you do. Please discuss with your surgeon what may be best for you.

### If your surgical site involves your arm, for 6 weeks:

- Do not lift, push, or pull anything that weighs more than 8 pounds (about the weight of a gallon of water). This includes children and pets.
- Avoid repetitive arm movements (on the surgical side). For example, avoid chores like vacuuming, doing dishes, and laundry.

### If your surgical site involves your leg, for 6 weeks:

- You can walk for short distances. For example, you can walk around your house and for activities of daily living.
- Avoid driving.

## Pain Control

Please read the handout “Pain Control After Reconstructive Surgery.” Please do not use ice or heat on your surgical sites.

## Follow-up Visits

- Your first follow-up visit will be 2 to 3 weeks after surgery.
- You will have other follow-up visits 3 months after surgery to measure your affected arm or leg and to check on your lymphedema. Your surgeon will let you know if you need additional visits.

## When to Contact the Care Team:

### Call the clinic right away if you have:

- Bleeding or drainage that soaks your dressing (hold pressure on the site to lessen bleeding)
- A fever higher than 100.5°F (38°C)
- Shaking and/or chills
- Any signs of infection at your surgical site:
  - Redness
  - Increased swelling
  - Bad-smelling drainage
  - Pus or cloudy-colored drainage
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- New rash
- Pain that is worsening and is no longer helped by your pain medicine

**If you are experiencing chest pain or shortness of breath, please call 911.**

**Please go to the ER (emergency room) if you experience any of these: redness, swelling, pain/cramp, or warmth usually in one limb. Any of these may be signs of a blood clot.**

## Questions?

Your questions are important. Contact your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

### **During Clinic Hours (Monday through Friday, except holidays, 8am to 5pm):**

If you have any questions or concerns, we recommend messaging your surgeon through MyChart. Please include a photo if needed.

You may also call the Center for Reconstructive Surgery at 206.598.1217, option 2.

### **Urgent Needs Outside of Clinic Hours:**

If you have an urgent care need after hours, on weekends, or holidays, please call 206.598.6190 and ask to speak to the plastic surgeon on call.