

Cancer related lymphoedema and diet

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is the build-up of fluid resulting in swelling in one or more regions of the body. For people with cancer, this may occur following surgery to remove the lymph nodes; or radiotherapy which can cause damage to the lymphatic system.

Healthy body weight

Weight loss has been shown to be effective at reducing lymphoedema in women with breast cancer. Extra body weight places greater strain on the lymphatic system's ability to move fluid around the body.

For men and women aged 18-64 years, your waist circumference measure and body mass index (BMI) are a good guide as to whether you are a healthy weight. Men should aim for a waist circumference measure under 94cm and women under 80cm. You can measure your BMI on the chart (over page). For those aged 65 years and over, speak to your doctor or dietitian as a higher body weight may be healthier at this stage of life.

If you are currently receiving cancer treatment, check with your doctor before commencing a weight loss program as weight loss can impact your treatment. The following website provides some resources to help you get started if you decide to lose weight:

www.healthyweight.health.gov.au

Remember that weight loss is best achieved by consistently following a healthy eating plan. Overly restrictive or 'fad' diets that eliminate food groups can result in poor eating habits, missing out on important nutrients and unsustainable results. Speak to your doctor or dietitian if you require further advice.

Is there a special diet for people with lymphoedema?

There is no special diet or foods that will reduce or cure lymphoedema. People with lymphoedema should drink at least 2 litres of water (or non-caffeinated fluids) each day, as dehydration may increase swelling. People with lymphoedema should eat a healthy balanced diet that includes foods from the five core food groups:



- Breads and cereals (preferably wholegrain)
- Vegetables (fresh, frozen or tinned)
- Fruit (fresh, frozen or tinned)
- Lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, nuts, seeds, lentils, legumes and/or tofu
- Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or dairy alternatives (such as fortified soy products), mostly reduced fat

Should I avoid any foods?

There is no evidence that a low salt diet reduces lymphoedema, however there are other health benefits associated with a low salt diet. Avoiding high salt foods and added salt is advisable for general health. Limiting processed foods is important for achieving and maintaining a healthy weight.

Medium and long chain triglycerides

A small number of studies have shown that altering the fat content of the diet may reduce lymphoedema swelling. Currently there is not enough evidence to recommend this as an effective treatment for lymphoedema as more research is needed. For more information speak with an accredited practising dietitian.

What about exercise?

There is some evidence that exercise may be beneficial in preventing and reducing lymphoedema and its symptoms. Regular exercise also assists with achieving and maintaining a healthy body weight and positively impacts other health measures. Speak to your doctor, physiotherapist or exercise physiologist about what is appropriate for you before commencing a new exercise program.

Myth busting

There are many myths about healthy eating and lymphoedema and sometimes it's hard to know what to believe. The following may help with deciding which advice to follow and which to ignore. If you are still unsure, talk to your doctor or dietitian about what's right for you.

Low carbohydrate diet

This is sometimes promoted to achieve rapid weight loss. Exclusion of carbohydrates results in reduced intake of certain nutrients and may lead to deficiencies and protein breakdown in the body. The high fat content of this diet may increase the workload of the lymphatic system and contribute to poorer cardiovascular health.



There is no evidence that this diet will improve lymphoedema and it may even make it worse.

Low protein diet

This is sometimes promoted to reduce lymph fluid as lymph fluid is high in protein. However, changes in dietary protein intake have not been shown to have any effect on lymphoedema. A diet low in protein can result in the body breaking down its protein stores resulting in muscle wastage and malnutrition.

Alkaline diet

Some websites promote this diet as a cure for lymphoedema however there is no scientific evidence to support the alkaline diet as a treatment for lymphoedema. The pH of the body is strictly maintained between 7.3-7.4 and altering your diet will not affect this.

Further information

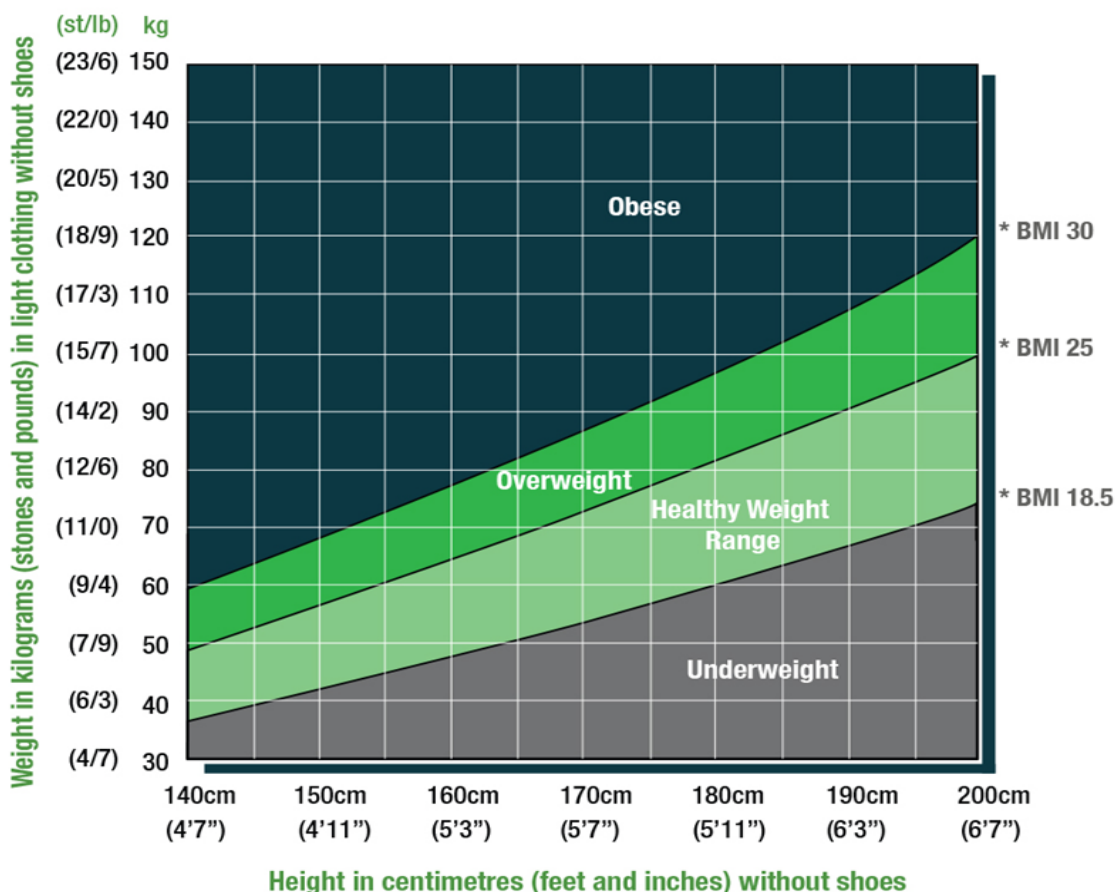
Healthy Eating and Breast Cancer

<https://www.bcna.org.au/media/2132/bcna-healthy-eating-booklet.pdf>

Australasian Lymphology Association

<https://www.lymphoedema.org.au/>

Aim for a healthy weight: BMI chart for adults



Source: Adapted from the Australian Dietary Guidelines (2013).