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Fluid Retention or Edema [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board \[2\]](#), 08/2015

Edema is swelling caused by the abnormal buildup of fluid in the body. The fluid collects under the skin within the tissues that are outside of the circulatory system. The circulatory system carries blood through the body.

Edema is most common in the feet and legs. It can also occur in the hands, arms, face, and abdomen. When edema occurs in the abdomen, doctors call it [ascites](#) [3]. When it occurs around the lungs, doctors call it [pleural effusion](#) [4].

Causes of edema

The following factors may cause edema:

- Cancer, especially kidney, liver, or ovarian cancers
- Some types of chemotherapy, including cisplatin (Platinol) and docetaxel (Docefrez, Taxotere)
- Other medications, including the following:
 - Corticosteroids, which are drugs that reduce swelling
 - Hormone replacement medications
 - Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), drugs such as ibuprofen or naproxen
 - Some blood pressure drugs
- Low levels of protein in the blood, caused by poor nutrition
- Inactivity, which can cause fluid to collect in the feet and legs
- Problems with kidney, liver, or heart function

Symptoms of edema

People with edema may experience the following symptoms:

- Puffiness, swelling, or a heavy feeling
- Feeling that clothes, shoes, rings, or watches are too tight
- Decreased flexibility of the joints in the arms and legs, such as the ankles, wrists, and fingers
- Shiny, tight, or stiff skin
- Indentation when it is pressing the skin. However, this does not happen when edema is severe.
- Sudden or rapid weight gain
- Decreased amount of urine

Diagnosing edema

To diagnose edema, your doctor may check whether the skin over the swollen area indents when pressed. He or she will likely ask you questions about recent weight gain, tightness of clothes or jewelry, and other symptoms. You may also need to have blood and urine tests and x-rays.

Managing edema

Relieving side effects is an important part of cancer care and treatment. This is called symptom management or [palliative care](#) [5]. Talk with your health care team about any symptoms you experience, including any new symptoms or a change in symptoms.

Managing edema focuses on correcting the underlying cause of fluid buildup. Edema caused by drugs or poor nutrition is reversible in some people. Edema caused by cancer or by kidney, heart, or liver problems may be more difficult to treat. In these situations, edema may be permanent. The following suggestions may help reduce swelling and relieve symptoms:

- Ask your doctor about prescription diuretics, which help get rid of extra fluid from the body by increasing urination.
- Eat a well-balanced diet.
- Reduce the amount of salt in your diet.
- Walk or do other exercises, which helps pump fluids back to your heart.
- Raise the affected area when sitting or lying down.
- Avoid standing for long periods or sitting with your legs crossed.
- Wear compression stockings or elastic sleeves to help push fluids back into your circulation system.
- Do not reduce amount of water or other fluids you drink without consulting your doctor.
- Talk with your doctor about whether physical therapy or occupational therapy may be helpful.

More Information

[Lymphedema](#) [6]

Links

- [1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/side-effects/fluid-retention-or-edema>
- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25049>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25249>
- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31921>
- [6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25250>