

Physical Concerns – *Feeling Full or Swollen Abdomen*

Internet version of this handout with active resource links at: <http://cancer-help.me/feelingfull>

Swelling, otherwise known as edema, is a build up of fluid in the body. Swelling most often affects the dependent extremities (like the feet, ankles and hands), but swelling can also affect other parts of the body, such as the abdomen.

Causes of swelling include:

- Fluid retention, which may be related to diet (salt and water), intravenous fluids, medication, heart disease, liver disease, or kidney failure
- Blockage of veins or the lymph system
- Malnutrition due to the cancer

Ascites is the medical term for a build up of fluid in the space surrounding the organs in the abdomen. When ascites is caused by cancer, it is sometimes called malignant ascites.

Symptoms of ascites

Ascites can sometimes cause discomfort. With ascites you may experience weight gain, abdominal swelling, sense of fullness or bloating, a sense of heaviness, indigestion, nausea or vomiting, changes to the belly button, fatigue, and decreased appetite.

Managing and treating ascites

The goal of treating ascites is to relieve the symptoms that are causing discomfort. You may not need treatment if the ascites is not causing discomfort. Ascites treatment may have unpleasant side effects. Talk with your doctor about the risks and benefits of each option before deciding on a treatment plan. Depending on the cause of your ascites, treatment will be different.

Options to help minimize ascites include:

- Diet modification -- reducing the amount of salt you eat or drinking less water or other liquids may be effective. Some people may find this regimen unpleasant and difficult to follow. If this causes dizziness or thirst let your doctor know.
- Diuretics: commonly called “water pills,” diuretics are medications which can reduce the amount of water in the body. Diuretics can be effective and safe but often do not work for cancer patients. They may cause dehydration, low blood pressure, dizziness, loss of sleep, fatigue, or contribute to depression.
- Paracentesis: paracentesis is a simple procedure to drain the fluid. This can be helpful if the ascites is significantly impacting your quality of life. If you need frequent drainage of the fluid, a special tube called a catheter can be placed in the abdomen. This catheter will help remove the fluid more easily, and this can be done any time at home.
- Shunts: A shunt is a small tube that is placed to help bypass or divert fluid from one place to another. In more severe or chronic cases, a shunt may be helpful.

Call your doctor or health care provider *immediately* if you are short of breath!

Adapted from: <https://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/side-effects/fluid-abdomen-or-ascites>
<http://chemocare.com/chemotherapy/side-effects/swelling.aspx>

Resources for Additional Information:

- [American Cancer Society, Swelling](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Fluid Retention or Edema](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Fluid in the Abdomen or Ascites](#)
- [NIH, NCI, Edema](#)
- [Chemocare, Swelling](#)

Información Española

- [NIH, Instituto Nacional Del Cáncer, Edema](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Hinchazón](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Retención de líquidos o edema](#)
- [Chemocare, Hinchazón](#)
- [American Cancer Society, Hinchazón](#)