

# Breast cancer survivors don't need to be afraid of air travel: study

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University of Alberta researcher Margie McNeely says results from an international study she was part of indicates certain precautions about the risk of lymphedema for breast cancer survivors are outdated.

McNeely, from the Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine, says women who've had [breast cancer surgery](#) are often warned that pressure changes in an airplane cabin could trigger [lymphedema](#), chronic swelling in the arm. But the study she did with an Australian research team showed that only five per cent of these women are likely at risk of developing any arm swelling when flying.

The caution about lymphedema risk is for women who have had [lymph nodes](#) removed from the armpit, a common procedure during cancer treatment. McNeely says because these lymph nodes help drain fluid when they are removed there is the potential for chronic swelling.

McNeely teamed up with Australian researcher Sharon Kilbreath to study the effect of air travel on 60 Canadian breast cancer survivors who were flying to Australia for an International Dragon Boat Festival. Seventeen of these women were from Edmonton. The study also involved a group of 12 women who were travelling to the festival from different areas of Australia.

The researchers compared both of the participants' arms, the arm where [lymph nodes](#) were removed from the armpit and the opposite unaffected arm, with a device that can detect subtle changes in fluid difference

between the arms. The measurements were done in Canada before they left and again in Australia when they arrived.

Findings indicate that 95 per cent of the women had no arm swelling. Four women had a slight increase but at a follow-up test, done six weeks after the women returned to Canada, three were back to normal and only one woman was found at possible risk for chronic swelling.

McNeely says that, until now, information about [air travel](#) and lymphedema risk has not been based on solid evidence, but says this research shows that while there is a risk of developing lymphedema during flight, that risk is very low.

**More information:** McNeely's research was published in the journal *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment*.

Provided by University of Alberta

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