

# Lymphedema Disease

## What Is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is a common cause of leg or arm swelling due to fluid collecting in those areas. The swelling is usually not painful, but it may cause a heavy, aching discomfort. It can limit a person's ability to use their arms or legs. Lymphedema is a treatable chronic condition. While there is no known cure, most people who receive treatment can live active, healthy lives.

### Causes

The **lymph vessels** are a type of blood vessel that carries fluid from tissues and organs back to the veins. Many things can damage the lymph vessels and cause lymphedema:

- Cancer
- · Treatment for breast cancer
- Surgery or radiation therapy
- Infections

For more information, review this related flyer:

• Focus on Compression Therapy

In some cases, lymphedema is a genetic condition that is present at birth or develops during the early years of life or puberty.

### **Symptoms**

swelling)

Signs of lymphedema are:

- Severe swelling of one or both arms or legs
- Heaviness of arms and legs (due to
- Inability to fully use or rotate arms or legs
- Frequent infections
- Swelling of fingers and toes
- Pitting edema. This occurs when a swollen part of the body has a dimple or pit after pressing down on the skin for a few seconds.

### **Risk Factors**

The most common cause of lymphedema is damage to or removal of lymph nodes as part of cancer treatment.

Other risk factors include:

- Older age
- Excessive weight
- Rheumatoid or psoriatic arthritis
- Major trauma or burns
- A family history of lymphedema

 Lymphatic filariasis. This is a disease caused by exposure to a parasite, typically spread by a mosquito, that infects the lymph nodes and lymph vessels.

### Diagnosis

Lymphedema is generally diagnosed based on symptoms, medical history, and risk factors. Your health care provider should make sure your limb swelling isn't related to other medical problems, such as congestive heart failure or **deep vein thrombosis** (blood clots in the legs).

If the cause of lymphedema isn't obvious, a health care provider may perform some of the following tests:

- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan: This machine uses magnetic fields to produce a 3D high resolution image of the affected area.
- Computed tomography (CT) scan: This takes X-ray-like images of different sections of your body to look for blockages in the lymphatic system.
- Doppler ultrasound: This exam uses high-frequency sound waves to locate obstructions in the lymph nodes.

### **Treatment**

Treatment for lymphedema is focused on moving the fluid out of the affected arm or leg. The goal is to reduce swelling and control pain or discomfort.

Before starting any treatments, discuss them with your health care team to see what is appropriate for you.

- Exercises: Light exercises can help with mobility and performing daily tasks. It's important that exercises are not too strenuous. Talk with your health care provider about what you should focus on.
- Wrapping the affected limb: To prevent injury, make sure the bandage on the affected arm or leg is not too tight.
- Pneumatic compression: You can get a
  prescription for a pump that is connected to
  a sleeve that you wear over the arm or leg.
  The pump slowly inflates and deflates, putting
  pressure on the limb.
- Compression garments: These long sleeves or stockings compress the arm or leg. Be sure to wear them while exercising. Putting on and taking off compression garments can be tricky. Ask your health care team about how to wear them correctly. You may need a prescription for these, as well.



# **Caring for Lymphedema**

Personal hygiene and avoidance of injury are essential in the prevention of lymphedema-related problems.

Follow these simple personal care measures to help keep skin healthy and reduce the risk of infection or swelling worsening:

- Keep skin as clean as possible. Dry skin thoroughly, but gently, especially between toes.
- Wash hands frequently, applying lotion after each handwashing to avoid over-drying the skin.
- Wear compression garments as prescribed during waking hours and remove them for sleep. Perform skin care before and after use. Wash gently and hang to dry. Have at least one extra pair to wear while you're washing the other.
- **Avoid blood pressure cuffs**, needle sticks, injections, or procedures on the affected limb. Wear a "lymphedema alert" bracelet.
- **Tell your health care provider immediately** of any new swelling or signs of infection, such as redness, pain, warmth, streaks, rash, blisters, fever, or flu-like symptoms.
- · Avoid wearing tight clothing.
- Avoid excess heat—overly hot showers, sun, hot tubs/saunas. Avoid sunburn and keep as cool as possible in summer weather.
- Wear cotton-lined household gloves for housework; use garden gloves for gardening.
- Carefully trim nails; see a podiatrist if necessary. Check feet with a mirror for wounds, fungal infections, or cracked skin. Wear extrawide, extra-deep shoes.
- Avoid trauma—pet scratches, insect bites, burns, sports injuries, or bruising. Wash all cuts with soap and water and apply antibiotic ointment. Seek appropriate care immediately for any cuts that look infected or do not heal after five to seven days.
- Maintain normal body weight. Follow a low-fat, low-salt, high-fiber diet plan. Exercise daily as ability allows—walking, swimming, light aerobics, biking, yoga, and stretching are recommended.

Adapted from "Lymphedema: A Patient's Guide" by Patricia A. Lewis, MSN, FNP, Bassett Healthcare, 1 Atwell Road, Cooperstown, NY 13326. Used with permission by the author.

# Questions for Your Doctor It is important to work closely with your health care provider about your diagnosis and treatment. You can bring this form with you to help talk to your medical provider about any questions and

concerns you may have.

