

How To Manage Lymphedema

Lymphedema

The lymphatic system removes extra fluid from body tissue into the bloodstream.

Lymphedema is the swelling of body tissue that can be caused by tissue damage or lymph node removal. Some people without cancer get lymphedema but the main cause in the U.S. is cancer or cancer treatment, such as surgery, radiation or lymph node removal.

This swelling most often occurs in your arm or leg. Only the side of your body that had damage or nodes removed would be affected.

Lymphedema can develop right away after surgery or many years later. All people who have had lymph node surgery have the potential to develop lymphedema.

Lymphedema Symptoms

Early symptoms of lymphedema are:

- changes to your skin
- skin feels sore or tight
- your arm or leg feels heavy
- you have a cut or burn that does not heal
- your clothing feels tighter
- your rings, shirts, pants or socks do not fit as well.

Treatments

■ Complete decongestive therapy

This treatment uses the following.

— Exercise

Exercise is important to stimulate the flow of lymph fluids. A specific exercise program will be created just for you. It will have flexibility, strengthening and aerobic (heart) exercises. You will learn how to do this exercise program at home.

— Education

If you have lymphedema, you have a higher risk of getting infections. You will learn the signs of infection and to care for your skin. If you follow these precautions, your risk can be lowered. You will also learn what activities may increase your risk (such as working in a garden) and how you can adapt those activities to fit your needs.

— Compression therapy

Using pressure with low-stretch bandages supports your lymphatic vessels. This helps keep the lymph fluid moving. You will learn how to put on the bandages, and when and how often you should wear them. When appropriate, you will be fit for compression garment(s).

— **Massage (manual lymphatic drainage)**
Using massage can help break down the lymph fluid and move it to other areas of your body. Massage also stimulates growth of tissue to help with moving the fluid.

- **Intermittent pneumatic compression**
This is used with complete decongestive therapy. It is not used by itself as a treatment.

A lymphedema specialist or certified lymphedema therapist uses a safe intermittent pneumatic compression machine to move the fluid from the farthest point on the arm or leg to the center of the body. Compression garments or bandages are then put on the affected arm or leg.

If you need this treatment, the lymphedema specialist or therapist will explain how the machine works.

Resources

- **Lymphatic Education & Research Network**
lymphaticnetwork.org
- **Lymphology Association of North America**
clt-lana.org
- **National Cancer Institute**
cancer.gov
- **American Cancer Society**
cancer.org
- **National Lymphedema Network**
lymphnet.org