

What is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is chronic swelling in a portion of the body - most commonly an arm or a leg. The swelling is due to an accumulation of lymph fluid (protein and water) in the tissue spaces under the skin. Lymphedema may occur days, months, or years after cancer surgery or the onset of obstruction of the lymph system.

Types and causes of Lymphedema

Primary Lymphedema may occur at any age for no known reason. All other causes of swelling MUST be ruled out before this diagnosis is made.

Secondary Lymphedema may occur after surgical removal of the lymph nodes, for example, due to cancer. Anything that causes obstruction of the venous or lymph systems may cause Lymphedema. Scarring from infection or radiation therapy may also cause Lymphedema because of this obstruction.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
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A complete handout is available.



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PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF LYMPHEDEMA



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WHY TREAT LYMPHEDEMA?

The lymph system is made up of tiny, fragile vessels, larger vessels, and lymph nodes. This system removes unwanted substances such as bacteria and cancer cells from the body. The lymph nodes also produce lymphocytes- - the disease fighting cells for the immune system.

When Lymphedema is untreated, and fluid doesn't move, the fluid becomes like a stagnant pond. This interferes with healing of simple cuts and provides an excellent environment for bacteria to grow. Infections can occur easily and become difficult to treat. If the fluid stays in the area too long, it also thickens and hardens. One can picture how this would make moving the arm or leg more difficult and further decrease circulation.

Treatment of Lymphedema is necessary to keep the lymph system functioning at its best possible performance.

HOW IS LYMPHEDEMA TREATED?

Even a mild case of Lymphedema should be treated to decrease and prevent the risk of poor mobility, infections, and pain, as well as for cosmetic reasons. Although Lymphedema is not curable, it can be managed well enough to prevent the risks.

COMPREHENSIVE LYMPHEDEMA MANAGEMENT INCLUDES:

1. Evaluation by a certified Lymphedema therapist. This can occur only with a physician's order to assure that there is no infection, and that there are no other medical reasons for the swelling.
2. Manual lymph drainage--specialized massage techniques to move the fluid.
3. Compression bandaging with low stretch bandages to reduce swelling.
4. Appropriate exercise program development.
5. Possible use of mechanical sequential pump.
6. Assist in timing of referral to a professional for measurement and

HOW IS LYMPHEDEMA PREVENTED?

Even minor swelling, redness, hardness, or warmth in a limb at risk should be reported to the doctor, as treatment is more successful with early intervention.

GOALS OF PREVENTION

- Protect from infection
- Avoid fatigue and injury
- Avoid heat sources and sunburn
- Avoid constriction

PART OF DAILY ROUTINE

1. **Daily Skin Check** for signs of infection, redness, swelling, hangnails, bites or cuts. Treat these with antibiotic cream and a band-aid if needed to protect area.
2. **Avoid Infection:** Wear gloves when doing "dirty work". Use electric shaver to shave affected limb. Keep clothing laundered. Use thimble when sewing.
3. **Avoid burns and sunburns:** Use sunscreen and long oven mitts.
4. **Avoid injury and fatigue:** Avoid heavy lifting and overheating.
5. **Avoid constriction** of jewelry and clothing.