

LYMPHEDEMA

Facts

“Lymphedema” is the swelling of the arms and legs that typically occurs after a person either damages their lymph nodes or has them removed as part of their cancer treatment. The lymphatic system, part of the body’s immune system, experiences blockages that stops lymph fluid from draining.

The resulting fluid buildup can cause swelling and discomfort.

Symptoms

- ◆ Swelling in the arms and/or legs
- ◆ Discomfort, aching and sometimes pain
- ◆ A sensation of tightness or heaviness at the swelling site
- ◆ Fibrosis, or thickening and hardening of the skin
- ◆ Motion restriction
- ◆ Repeated infections

Diagnosis

After ruling out conditions such as kidney failure, congestive heart failure, blood clots, or other conditions that may cause swelling, a doctor will examine your medical and surgical history involving the lymph nodes to identify possible lymphedema.

For further clarification, a doctor may order CT or MRI scans of the lymph nodes, as well as refer to a test called a lymphoscintigraphy that examines fluid flow through the lymph nodes.

A lymph node is part of the lymphatic, circulatory, and immune systems. Primary function is to weed out infection, filter out harmful agents and cancer cells.



Treatment

While there is no cure, there are treatments available to help manage swelling and discomfort.

- ◆ **Elastic sleeves** provide strategic pressure, compressing at the end of the limb and loosening slightly toward the torso. This helps alleviate pressure at the end of the arm or leg.
- ◆ **Bandages** providing similar pressure (usually toward the end of the arm or leg) help push swelling out of the extremity.
- ◆ **Massage techniques** can act as manual compression to provide drainage.
- ◆ **Exercises** that stimulate limb muscles through light contraction may help encourage lymph flow.
- ◆ **Pneumatic compression devices** are sleeves that are connected to a pump, which controls continual compression from the end of the arm or leg toward the abdomen.

Living with lymphedema

- ◆ Avoid extreme heat or cold
- ◆ Wear loose clothing and jewelry, avoiding unnecessary restriction
- ◆ Keep a close eye on swelling, which can be a warning sign of infection
- ◆ Protect affected areas from day-to-day irritation
- ◆ Keep affected limbs above heart-level when able
- ◆ Maintain the medical regimen prescribed by your doctor. If you wish to make any changes, consult your doctor first.

For more information on lymphedema, visit www.PeninsulaHomeCare.com.



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