

LYMPHEDEMA

Lymphedema is a chronic medical condition characterized by the accumulation of lymphatic fluid in the interstitial tissues, leading to swelling, discomfort, and potential complications. It occurs when the lymphatic system, responsible for draining excess fluid and waste products from tissues, is compromised or damaged, resulting in impaired lymphatic fluid transport. Lymphedema most commonly affects the extremities, such as arms or legs, but can occur in other parts of the body as well.

Causes of lymphedema can be categorized into two main types:

- 1. Primary Lymphedema:** This type is often due to a congenital malformation or abnormal development. Dysplasia of the lymphatic system can result as hypoplasia or hyperplasia. Hypoplasia is the most common form of dysplasia; the number of lymph collectors is reduced, and the diameter of existing lymph vessels is smaller than normal. In hyperplasia, the diameter of the lymph collectors is larger than normal which results in a malfunction of the valvular system within the collectors, which often leads to lymphatic reflux. It may be present at birth or develop later in life, usually during adolescence or early adulthood.
- 2. Secondary Lymphedema:** This type is more common and occurs as a result of damage to the lymphatic system. The mechanical insufficiency present in secondary lymphedema is caused by a known insult to the lymphatic system. Common causes include surgical procedures that involve lymph node removal, such as those done for cancer treatment (e.g., breast cancer surgery), radiation therapy, trauma, infections (like filariasis), and inflammation. In the United States, the highest incidence of lymphedema is observed following breast cancer surgery, particularly among those who undergo radiation therapy following axillary lymph node dissection (ALND).

Currently, there is no cure for lymphedema; therefore, the main goal of treatment is to return the lymphedema to a stage of latency by utilizing remaining lymph vessels and other lymphatic pathways. The normal or near normal size of the limb should be maintained, and re-accumulation of lymph fluid should be prevented. Additional goals are prevention and elimination of

infections and the reduction and removal of fibrotic tissues.

Decongestive Therapies are the mainstay of treatment for lymphedema and are designed to reduce swelling, manage symptoms, and improve overall quality of life. These therapies often include:

- 1. Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD):** A gentle manual treatment technique performed by trained therapists to encourage the movement of lymphatic fluid from congested areas to healthier regions of the body. The therapist applies a gentle stretch of the subcutaneous tissues along with a light directional pressure that serves to move lymph fluid in the appropriate direction.
- 2. Compression Therapy:** The use of compression garments (e.g., bandages, stockings) to apply controlled pressure to the affected area, promoting fluid drainage and preventing fluid buildup.
- 3. Exercise:** Gentle exercises and movements help stimulate lymphatic flow, improve muscle pump action, and support overall circulation. In addition, breathing exercises are an essential component for the sufficient return of lymphatic fluid back to the bloodstream by the downward and upward movement of the diaphragm in deep abdominal breathing.
- 4. Skin Care:** Proper skincare and hygiene are crucial to prevent infections and skin-related complications in areas prone to lymphedema. Individuals affected with lymphedema are susceptible to infections of the skin and nails and meticulous care of these areas is essential to the success of CDT.
- 5. Combined Decongestive Therapy (CDT):** A noninvasive, multicomponent approach that combines MLD, compression therapy, decongestive exercises, and skincare to manage lymphedema effectively.

Qualifications Required for Treatment: The treatment of lymphedema typically involves a multidisciplinary approach, often including various healthcare professionals such as:

- 1. Certified Lymphedema Therapists:** These therapists are specially trained in manual lymphatic drainage and other techniques used in decongestive therapy. They have expertise in assessing and managing lymphedema.

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2. **Physicians:** Medical doctors, especially those specialized in lymphology, vascular medicine, or rehabilitation medicine, can provide diagnosis, oversee treatment plans, and address any underlying medical issues contributing to lymphedema.

3. **Physical Therapists:** These professionals can guide patients through appropriate exercises and movements to improve lymphatic flow and overall mobility.

4. **Occupational Therapists:** They can assist patients in adapting to their condition, providing guidance on daily activities, recommending assistive devices if needed.

5. **Surgeons and Oncologists:** For cases involving secondary lymphedema due to cancer treatment, oncologists and surgeons might play a role in coordinating treatment plans and addressing the underlying causes.

It's important for individuals with lymphedema to consult with a qualified healthcare professional who can properly diagnose the condition and develop a personalized treatment plan based on their medical history and specific needs.

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for *The Magnolia News*



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