

Lipoedema

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What is lipoedema?

Lipoedema is a long-term condition. It is an abnormal buildup of fat cells, generally below the waist, making the hips, thighs and legs look out of proportion to the upper body, although sometimes the arms are affected.

What causes lipoedema?

There is little understanding what causes lipoedema. It seems to exclusively affect females and is believed to have an inherited factor as there is a family history in some cases. There is generally a gradual onset around the time of hormonal changes (puberty, pregnancy or the menopause).

What are the symptoms?

- Enlargement of the lower limbs (and sometimes the arms) which is the same on both sides
- Feet (and hands) are usually not affected, giving a cuffed appearance. As the condition progresses the feet (and hands) may swell.
- Pads of fat under the knees and hips
- Weight loss on the upper body but the lower body loss is not proportionate
- The swelling is soft, loose and floppy and does not indent when pressed
- Tenderness and bruising easily with no apparent cause
- Pain in the joints, particularly the knees
- Heaviness and discomfort in the legs

How is it diagnosed?

Through a comprehensive assessment with most cases based on medical history and physical examination.

How is it treated?

Treatment is based on skin care, exercise, elevation and compression garments. Swelling may occur with the increase in the build up of fat cells over time. Treatment may include compression bandaging.

The benefits are to prevent additional swelling, skin and tissues changes (skin breakdown and infection) and aid comfort. In the case of swelling appearance (where the fat obstructs the lymphatic drainage), the benefits are to stabilise swelling and try to reduce it, reshape body areas, improve skin and tissue condition, function and/or mobility plus aid comfort.

The consequences of non-treatment are:

- a higher risk of wounds, leaking lymph fluid and infection (cellulitis)
- reduced function and/or mobility
- discomfort
- additional altered body image
- difficulty finding clothes and footwear to fit.

Possible effects of treatment

Treatments and maintenance options are individual. The effects will be discussed with each person.

What is the expected outcome of treatment?

Treatment lengths and outcomes are individual and will be discussed with each person.

Are there any possible complications?

Complications of lipoedema and its treatment is individual and will be discussed with each person.

Assessment, follow up or referral on

The North Devon Lymphoedema Service is based at Barnstaple Health Centre. Referrals to the service for assessment can be made via a GP or other healthcare professional.

Help available and further information

North Devon Lymphoedema Service Tel: 01271 341551

British Lymphology Society - www.lymphoedema.org/bls

Lipoedema UK – www.lipoedema.co.uk

Lipodema Ladies – www.lipodemaladies.com

Lipoedema NHS Choices – www.nhs.uk/conditions/lipoedema

Lymphoedema Support Network – www.lymphoedema.org/lsn

References

British Lymphology Society – www.lymphoedema.org/bls

Lipoedema UK – www.lipoedema.co.uk

Lymphoedema Framework. *Best Practice for the Management of Lymphoedema*. International consensus. London:MEP Ltd, 2006.

Lymphoedema Support Network – www.lymphoedema.org/lsn

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

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