

Lymphoedema

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What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a long term condition. It is a buildup of body fluid, which causes swelling. It can affect any part of the body, but most commonly develops in an arm or leg.

What causes lymphoedema?

The swelling is a result of an impaired lymphatic system either when it has not developed properly or when it has been damaged.

Those more at risk are people that are born with an abnormality in the lymph transport system, known as primary lymphoedema or those that have damage to the lymphatic vessels and/or lymph nodes, known as secondary lymphoedema. Secondary lymphoedema can be the result of trauma, surgery, radiotherapy, cancer and post deep vein thrombosis. Complex chronic oedema could be a result of veins not working very well, infection, inflammation, reduced mobility and obesity.

There may be a delay of several years between a causative event and the appearance of lymphoedema.

What are the symptoms?

Early signs and symptoms of lymphoedema are:

- clothing and jewellery becoming tighter
- feelings of heaviness, tightness, fullness or stiffness
- aching
- observable swelling which goes up and down

Later signs and symptoms are:

- skin and tissue changes
- skin breakdown – wounds and lymph fluid leakage

- body shape distortion
- swelling that does not reduce
- reduced function and/or mobility in the area

How is it diagnosed?

A comprehensive assessment, based on your medical history and a physical examination will be carried out. Sometimes, in certain circumstances, you may be referred for a special imaging technique called lymphoscintigraphy, and is used to identify an abnormality or damage in your lymph transport system.

How is it treated?

Treatment is based on:

- Skin care advice on good hygiene techniques, with the use of emollients daily and how to avoid damage to the skin.
- Exercise to stimulate the muscle pump action and aid lymphatic flow back to the main circulation.
- Elevation of the affected limb to aid lymphatic flow back to the main circulation.
- Compression garments to stabilise and reduce the swelling, by aiding lymphatic flow back to the main circulation.
- Simple Lymphatic Drainage (SLD) which is a self-administered simple massage technique to encourage the lymph fluid flow away from the affected area.

More severe swelling involves more intensive treatments including:

- Compression bandaging – mainly the application of inelastic bandages, although elastic bandages or a modified version may occasionally be used. This is used to reduce swelling, restore shape to the limb/affected area, reduce skin changes, support overstretched inelastic skin, stop the leaking of lymph fluid and soften tissues.
- Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD) – a treatment that involves a gentle massage technique to encourage lymph fluid away from congested areas by increasing activity of normal lymphatics and bypassing ineffective or damaged lymph vessels.
- Intermittent Pneumatic Compression (IPC) – a device that mimics MLD. An arm or leg sleeve is fitted over the affected limb and the treatment lasts usually for 40 minutes.
- Low level light therapy – a pulsating light that has a beneficial effect on cells and tissues, helping to reduce swelling and soften tissues, including scars. It can also be used to reduce discomfort, heaviness and pain. Courses of treatment are generally three times a week for three weeks.
- Medical taping – a treatment that involves the application of tape to direct lymph fluid to non-congested drainage points and to aid tissue softening.

- Physiotouch – pulsation and vibration under negative pressure to stimulate the lymphatics and manipulate fascia.

The benefits of the treatment above are as follows: the swelling will be stabilised and possibly reduced, body areas will be reshaped and the condition of the patient's skin and tissue will improve. In addition, with a reduction in the limb size, weight and discomfort, we will aim to improve the patient's mobility and their ability to move or use the affected limb/part of the body and above all, to make the patient more comfortable.

The consequences of non-treatment are:

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

Possible effects of treatment

The possible effects of treatment and any maintenance options will depend on the individual and the type of treatment performed. As each treatment is based on the patient's individual needs, the effects will be discussed with each person during their initial appointment.

Are there any possible complications?

Complications of lymphoedema can include lymph fluid leakage, wounds and cellulitis (a bacterial infection of the deep layer of skin). However, these complications and subsequent treatment will depend on the particular circumstances of the patient and will be discussed at the appointment.

Assessment, follow up or referral

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/social care professional such as a nurse or therapist.

Help available and further information

North Devon Lymphoedema Service Tel: 01271 341551

Breast Cancer Care – www.breastcancercare.org.uk

British Lymphology Society – www.lymphoedema.org/bls

Lymphoedema Support Network – www.lymphoedema.org/lsn

Macmillan Cancer Relief – www.macmillan.org.uk

NHS Choices – www.nhs.uk/conditions/lymphoedema

References

British Lymphology Society – www.lymphoedema.org/bls

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

Lymphoedema Support Network – www.lymphoedema.org/ltn

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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