



### What is Lymphoedema

Lymphoedema is the accumulation of excessive amounts of protein-rich fluid resulting in swelling of one or more regions of the body.

This is due to a mechanical failure of the lymphatic system and occurs when the demand for lymphatic drainage exceeds the capacity of the lymphatic circulation. The condition usually affects the limb(s) although it may also involve the trunk, breast, head and neck or genital area.

The lymphatic system is a network of vessels and nodes throughout the body that transports fluid (lymph) from the body tissues back to the bloodstream. The functions of the lymphatic system are to maintain the volume and protein concentration of the extracellular fluid in the body and to assist the immune system in destroying pathogens and removing waste products from the tissues.

### Symptoms

- The affected area feels heavy
- Skin may feel tight
- Skin is hotter than other areas of the body
- Aching
- Pins and needles
- Painful joints
- Swelling

### Causes

Secondary Lymphoedema is the most common type developing following damage to the lymphatic system. The damage may occur as a result of some cancer treatments including the removal of lymph nodes, following radiotherapy to lymph node groups or with the progression of malignant disease. The onset of Lymphoedema may be at any time. It may occur within months of the damage or it may appear years later.

Secondary Lymphoedema may also arise without a cancer diagnosis when one or more of the following conditions occur:

- Trauma and tissue damage
- Venous disease
- Immobility and dependency
- Factious – self harm
- Infection such as cellulitis
- Filariasis
- Obesity



### Treatment

Lymphoedema is incurable and is a progressive chronic condition that will require lifetime management and treatment.

The evidence based treatment for Lymphoedema is **Complex Decongestive Therapy (CDT)**. This starts with an intensive therapy phase, during which the patient receives daily treatment and training. This is followed by a maintenance phase, during which the patient is encouraged to take over their own care using techniques that they have been taught.

The four components of CDT are:

#### 1. Remedial exercises

Light exercise aimed at encouraging movement of the lymph fluid out of the limb.

#### 2. Skincare

Good skin care reduces the risks of skin infections, such as cellulitis.

#### 3. Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD)

The Lymphoedema therapist uses special massage techniques to move fluid into working lymph nodes, where they are drained.

The lymphoedema therapist also teaches several self-massage techniques that can be used during the maintenance phase.

#### 4. Multilayer lymphoedema bandaging (MLLB)

Muscles surrounding lymph vessels and nodes move the fluid through the lymphatic system. Unlike the circulation of blood, there is no pump for the lymphatic system. The aim here is to use bandages and compression garments to support the muscles and encourage them to move fluid out of the affected body part.

Patients will also be taught how to apply their own bandages and compression garments correctly so that MLLB can continue during the maintenance period.

### Exercises

Exercise plays an important role in managing your Lymphoedema as muscular movement assists the lymphatic system to pump lymph (protein rich fluid) to an unaffected area to drain the swelling.

Your treating Lymphoedema therapist will provide prescribed exercises for you to complete.

### Self help for your Lymphoedema

Areas of the body affected by Lymphoedema are prone to infection. Suggestions to manage Lymphoedema include:

- Pay particular attention to skin care to reduce the risk of infection
- Avoid cuts, abrasions or other tissue injuries in the affected area
- Don't allow your skin to be sunburned.
- Avoid direct heat, such as hot baths, saunas and sunbathing.

## Lymphoedema Fact Sheet



Hastings Sports Injury &  
Physiotherapy Centre

EXCELLENCE DRIVEN, SUPERIOR RESULTS

- Have your bra professionally fitted.
- Don't wear tight jewellery.
- Try not to sit down for long periods of time or, if you do, elevate the affected limb.
- Complete regular gentle exercise and remain active
- Make sure that any medical procedures such as injections, blood tests or blood pressure readings are taken from the unaffected arm if possible.
- Avoid carrying heavy loads for any length of time, as this does not allow good lymph fluid clearance from the tissues.