

Compression Therapy/Garments- Are an important part of managing lymphoedema. They may be used to prevent increase in swelling or following CPT. Compression Garments aim to maintain the size of the limb, in combination with exercise and massage.

Complex Physical Therapy (CPT) - This treatment generally lasts around two to four weeks. It consists of a combination of skin care, specific massage, compression bandaging and exercises followed by ongoing compression garments.

Laser Therapy- This form of therapy stimulates the cells and softens the tissues. Some evidence suggests that it may stimulate lymph vessels and help them to work more effectively.

Pneumatic Compression Pump- This is a mechanical alternative to massage. Pumps can be purchased for in home use or accessed through lymphoedema services.

Surgery – surgical options for managing lymphoedema are emerging in Australia. These include: liposuction, lymph node transfers and lymphatic reconstruction. Currently these options are available through limited centres.

Emerging technology

There are a variety of other technologies that are being trialled around the world to assist with the management of lymphoedema. Results vary but are exciting for the future.

Drugs- There is currently no recommended medications available for the treatment of lymphoedema in Australia.

COPING WITH LYMPHOEDEMA

If you are diagnosed with lymphoedema it is not unusual to feel anxious and overwhelmed particularly when this diagnosis is associated with a previous cancer or other serious diagnosis. Support through the LAQ can be beneficial through sharing with other people who are living with this condition. Sourcing a lymphoedema professional is also an important part of your personal journey.

FURTHER READINGS

- Mortimer P, Levine G Let's talk lymphoedema, London 2017
- Cancer Council Qld Understanding lymphoedema

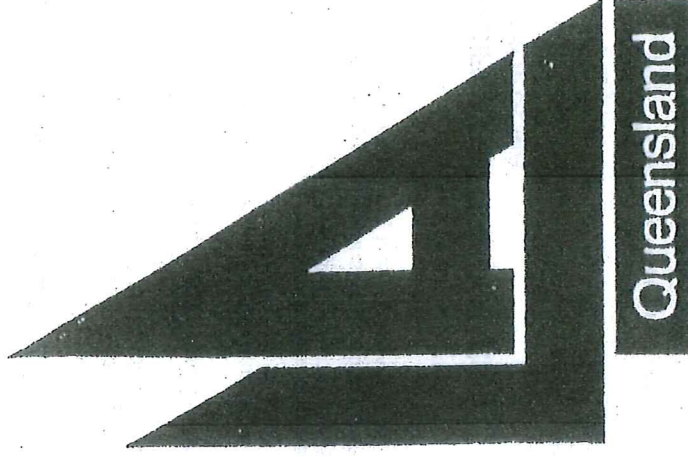
DISCLAIMER

Information in this document is general and presented in a way that is easy to understand. Statements are supported by clinical and experimental findings. Check with your doctor regarding personal medical treatment.

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LYMPHOEDEMA

FACT SHEET



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THE LYMPHATIC SYSTEM

The lymphatic system is part of both the circulatory and the immune system. The system is made up of lymph vessels, lymph fluid, lymph nodes and lymph tissue. The lymph fluid is protein rich and contains white blood cells that protect the body against infection and disease.

WHAT IS LYMPHOEDEMA?

Lymphoedema is a swelling (oedema) that occurs when lymph fluid builds up in the tissues under the skin. It is a consequence of the inability of the lymphatic system to remove the awaiting lymph fluid.

When the transport capacity of the lymph system is overloaded swelling occurs.

Lymphoedema is a chronic condition and can be progressive.

Over time the tissues of the swollen limb can become hard and this makes it more difficult for fluid to move through the vessels. Infections also cause scarring of vessels and can cause the lymphoedema to become a greater problem.

CLASSIFICATION AND CAUSES OF LYMPHOEDEMA

There are two classifications of lymphoedema. These are:

- 1. Primary Lymphoedema** This results from a malformation or poorly functioning lymphatic system from birth. It may only become apparent later in life when the lymph system is challenged by circumstances such as an injury, child birth or an infection
- 2. Secondary Lymphoedema** This results from an obstruction to the lymphatic tracts or damage to the lymphatic vessels or nodes which cause the lymph system to be overloaded. It can result from cancer treatment where surgery or radiotherapy has damaged lymph nodes and vessels. Lymphoedema may also occur after accidental traumas (severe cuts or burns), parasites (filariasis), severe infections and following paralysis of a limb. Secondary lymphoedema may occur at any time, months or years after, the lymphatics have been damaged.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF LYMPHOEDEMA

Some of the common signs and symptoms include:

- Swelling to a part of the body
- Feelings of heaviness and tension

Short term swelling often occurs after surgery but this generally settles over a few weeks. Not all swelling is chronic lymphoedema, however if the above signs and symptoms occur you should notify your doctor or health professional.

DIAGNOSIS

Lymphoedema may be diagnosed by your GP, oncologist or lymphoedema health professional based on your symptoms and past medical history and volume changes. Impedance spectroscopy, MRI and doppler (to exclude DVT) may all be useful. A lymphoscintigram is a specific test of the lymphatic system. Further work in this area is continuing.

PREVENTING AND MINIMISING LYMPHOEDEMA

Preventing lymphoedema is difficult as primary lymphoedema is a genetic condition and secondary lymphoedema is often the result of lifesaving treatment. But research has identified some factors that can help minimise the effect.

Lymphoedema forms a protein-rich environment, in which bacteria thrive and infections form easily. Therefore, it is important to look after the affected limb.

WE RECOMMEND YOU

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Look after your skin, keep moisturised-your skin is the first barrier to infection
- Avoid medical procedures on the affected limb - i.e. chemo, pic lines if there is an alternative
- Undertake a graduated exercise program, including walking and hydrotherapy
- Wear your prescribed compression garment as recommended by your health professional
- Wear your prescribed compression garment and do gentle exercise when flying or travelling long distances.

YOU SHOULD TRY TO AVOID

- Sunburn
- Cuts and scratches, insect bites, burns and strong detergents
- Tattoos to the affected limb
- Long periods of inactivity
- Hot spas and saunas

TREATMENT

Lymphoedema requires lifelong self-care to manage effectively. This list is some of the treatments currently available and not exhaustive.

Skin Care – Infections can cause serious complications for a person with lymphoedema therefore it is important that the skin integrity is maintained to enable an effective barrier against bacteria.

Elevation – This can aid in the removal of fluids by reducing the effect created by gravity. Once gravity is reduced the deep inspirations and gentle contractions of the muscles can help the fluid to flow.

Weight Management – Excessive weight can place the lymphatics under excessive stress, requiring them to carry a greater load of fluid. If weight can be maintained at a healthy level then the lymphatics will have the potential to remove accumulated fluid.

Moderate Exercises – Exercises are helpful, and should be graded to your ability. Swimming and hydrotherapy are recommended because the water applies pressure to the limb like compression garments.

Psychological support – as a chronic condition lymphoedema can have an overwhelming impact on a person's psychological health affecting ability to work and personal relationships. It is important to seek psychological support if symptoms are impacting on this aspect of your health.

Social support- many people find support through groups such as the LAQ an important part of their self-management for chronic lymphoedema. Educational sessions and social support are some of the benefits.