



Central  
Health



**LYMPHEDEMA  
MANAGEMENT  
PROGRAM**

***Ambulatory Services***

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## What is lymphedema?

*Lymphedema* is a build-up of protein rich fluid in the tissues just below the surface of the skin. It causes swelling in the arm(s), leg(s) or other areas such as the abdomen, chest, breast, back, or head and neck. It may even affect the genital areas. It can affect children and adults (male or female) and fortunately it can be treated or managed.

The number of cases of lymphedema in Canada is not known. It is believed to be an underestimated health problem and is often misunderstood by many health care providers.

### **The lymphatic system**

Lymph fluid is usually colourless and forms normally in the body, moving in a network of lymph vessels and lymph nodes. It can drain 2 to 3 litres of fluid per day back into the circulatory system. The lymphatic system plays an important role in the body's ability to fight infection.

Lymphedema occurs when the drainage routes (vessels or lymph nodes) of this system become blocked, damaged or are not properly developed. The build-up of this protein rich fluid causes thickening and hardening of the skin and may increase your risk of infection.

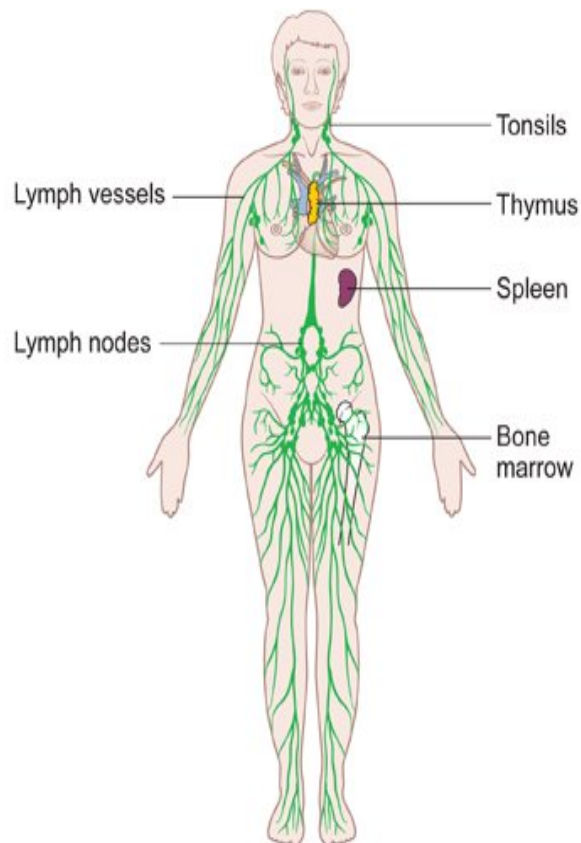


Diagram of the lymphatic system  
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## ***Types of Lymphedema***

**Primary lymphedema** is caused by a lymphatic system that is underdeveloped or malformed. There may be a genetic reason for this or it may be of unknown cause. Primary lymphedema may be present at birth or may develop later in life such as during puberty.



***Primary lymphedema -legs***

**Secondary lymphedema** results from damage to the lymphatic system. The most common cause in Canada is from cancer treatment following surgery and/or radiation. Other causes of secondary lymphedema are: infection, burns, obesity or injury to the lymph nodes or vessels. It also can be caused by trauma to the veins from blood clots (deep vein thrombosis), varicose veins and leg ulcers. Lack of muscle movement such as a paralyzed limb may also contribute to lymphedema. In underdeveloped countries, a parasitic disease called filariasis also causes lymphedema.



***Secondary lymphedema -legs***

## ***Symptoms of lymphedema***

The signs and symptoms of lymphedema may include:

- Clothing or jewellery becoming tighter
- A feeling of fullness, heaviness, tightness or pressure in the skin or affected limb
- Stiffness or less flexibility in an ankle, knee, hand, wrist or shoulder
- Noticeable swelling
- Leakage of lymph fluid through the skin of a swollen area
- Sudden onset of infection of the skin (redness, increased heat and swelling). This is often accompanied by pain, tenderness and sometimes fever. See a doctor immediately if any of these symptoms develop

***Early diagnosis and  
treatment are vital to  
the management of  
lymphedema***



## ***Treatment and management***

The best practice management of lymphedema has a holistic, multidisciplinary approach that includes:

- Exercise to promote lymphatic and venous flow by using the body's muscle and joint pumps
- Skin care to maintain hydration of skin and minimize the risk of infection. The use of pH neutral lotions is recommended. For some, an antibacterial cleanser may be advised
- Risk reduction and education to avoid factors that may make lymphedema worse
- Pain management, as well as steps to improving your mental, physical and spiritual well-being. Lymphedema is a chronic, lifelong condition that must be managed and balanced with daily life
- A specialized massage called *manual lymphatic drainage* is used to direct lymph fluid
- Compression therapy involves the use of bandages, garments and sometimes a compression pump



***Leg and foot bandaging***

## ***Treatment and management***

The goal of lymphedema treatment is to help reduce swelling and maintain the reduction over time. By preventing the swelling from getting worse hopefully there will be a decrease in the chance of complications. You are an active participant in your own care. Self management is crucial.

Standard treatment is called complete decongestive therapy (CDT) which is a combination of skin care, exercise, education, manual lymphatic drainage and compression therapy. Treatments should be performed by an experienced and certified lymphedema therapist.



***With proper treatment - results can be amazing!***

## ***Risk reduction***

Persons at risk for lymphedema need to know what lymphedema is and understand why they are at risk. Leading a healthy lifestyle and knowing how to minimize the risk of developing lymphedema is important. Being able to recognize the early signs and symptoms and to contact their healthcare provider in the event of onset of swelling is crucial.

Use a common sense approach:

- Keep nails trimmed and clean. Practice good skin care (avoid cuts, scratches, burns, razors, insect bites, fungal infection and sunburn)
- Maintain your optimal weight
- Follow a well balance diet
- Participate in some form of exercise, movement and limb elevation
- Avoid injury to at risk area
- Avoid exposure to extremes of temperature such as: hot baths, hot tubs, saunas or extreme cold
- Use sunscreen and insect repellent
- Avoid tight clothing, watches and jewellery
- Wear your compression garments if recommended by your healthcare provider
- Wear comfortable, well fitting shoes if at risk for lower extremity lymphedema
- Wear rubber gloves, gardening gloves, oven mitts
- Use electric razors on underarm hair if at risk for arm lymphedema

Trauma or injury to an affected area can increase your risk of infection and further swelling.

***Avoid the following whenever possible: injections, acupuncture, blood sampling and blood pressure readings from the affected limb.***

## ***General recommendations***

Use your affected limb normally, muscle activity will help to encourage the drainage of lymph fluid. Avoid over-exertion as this may increase swelling. Always consult your doctor before undertaking a new exercise program. Persons with or at risk for arm lymphedema should avoid carrying heavy items such as purses and travel bags on that arm. If you are at risk or have leg lymphedema you should avoid standing or sitting with your legs down for long periods.



***Compression Stocking***

Some health care professionals suggest the use of a compression garment when flying. Please discuss this with your health care provider.

***Please consult your doctor if you plan to travel - especially outside of Canada.***

***For more information on Lymphedema  
please contact :***

***T: (709) 651-6266 or visit the web at:***

***[www.lymphnl.com](http://www.lymphnl.com)***

***[www.lymphontario.ca](http://www.lymphontario.ca)***

***[www.lymphnet.org](http://www.lymphnet.org)***

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