

Lymphedema: Diagnosis, Treatment & Prevention

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Lymphedema is a swelling of a body part, most often occurring in the extremities, but can also occur in the face, neck, chest, back abdomen, or genitals. The lymphatic system plays a large role in immunological function and circulation. Lymphedema occurs as the result of abnormal accumulation of protein-rich fluid (lymphatic fluid) in the affected area.

Even though *lymphedema* affects approximately 1% of the US population, its seriousness and the problems it creates are often poorly understood in the medical community.

Lymphedema can affect both men and women of all ages from infants to the elderly and should be treated before it becomes too serious or irreversible.

Lymphedema can be classified as either primary or secondary. *Primary lymphedema* may be present at birth, at the onset of puberty, or during adulthood, it is sometimes hereditary, and can affect several limbs. *Primary lymphedema* occurs because of an insufficiency of the lymphatic system and usually appears for no apparent reason.

Secondary lymphedema is much more common and characterized by an identifiable cause. It is often seen after surgical dissection of lymph nodes for cancer or side effects of radiation therapy. *Secondary lymphedema* may also occur after injury, scarring, trauma, or infection of the lymphatic system.

Lymphedema can develop within a few days, months, or even many years after a procedure and sometimes not at all. The first obvious sign of *lymphedema* is swelling. Other symptoms may include feelings of tightness, heaviness, or achiness in the affected area as one may notice jewelry and clothing feeling tighter.

Detecting any slight increase of swelling is one of the most important steps to prevention of *lymphedema*. Other precautions include never allowing any injections or blood pressure cuffs on the extremity at risk, avoiding heavy lifting and extreme temperatures, wearing a compression sleeve when flying, and avoiding any trauma to the affected area.

Once the diagnosis of *lymphedema* is confirmed, certain treatment procedures are available. Since there is no cure for *lymphedema*, the goal of treatment is to decrease swelling and maintain the reduction. This can be achieved through a treatment called complete decongestive therapy (CDT). There are two phases of CDT. The first phase consists of moving lymphatic fluid out of the affected region and decreasing the swelling with manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) techniques and bandaging. This treatment is usually performed daily for 2-6 weeks, depending on the severity. Once the swelling is reduced, the patient is fitted for a compression garment. The second phase consists of self management to optimize the results from the first phase. This phase consists of skin care, wearing garments, self MLD, and exercise.

Methodist Medical Center Outpatient Therapy, a certified Lymphedema Treatment Center, has been awarded a grant from the Susan G. Komen Foundation to help cover the cost of treatment and supplies for patients with lymphedema secondary to breast cancer. To learn more about the program, please contact *Methodist Outpatient Therapy* at **309/672-4568** or *Professional Therapy Services* at **309/674-7874**. To learn more about Lymphedema, visit www.lymphnet.org or www.lymphedemacircleofhope.org.

