

ARE YOU AT RISK?

Lymphedema most commonly follows a surgical procedure where there has been removal of or damage to the lymph nodes or vessels.

If you have been exposed to any of the following procedures or situations, you may be at risk for developing lymphedema.

- Biopsy of inguinal lymph node
- Breast surgery, Prostate surgery
- Radiation treatment, Chemotherapy
- Other surgery involving lymph nodes
- Broken limbs from accidents
- Hernia repair
- Venous insufficiency
- Severe infection
- Other medical procedures involving the lymphatic system

PRECAUTIONS

- Never have blood drawn or blood pressure cuffs on affected limb
- Avoid lifting heavy objects such as luggage or purses
- Avoid heavy breast prostheses
- Avoid tight clothing, especially undergarments
- Avoid hot baths, hot showers, hot tubs, saunas
- Use care with rings, watches, bracelets, which can be constrictive
- Use sunscreen to avoid dangerous skin exposure
- Use electric razors to prevent razor nicks and cuts
- Infections can result from insect bites, manicures, pedicures, skin punctures, cuts, pet scratches, gardening, etc.
- When traveling, always wear a compression garment or bandages. On trips over 1 hour, it is suggested that you get up and move around as much as possible

Note: Always refer to your physician for complete medical advice and treatment plans. This brochure is not intended to substitute for medical care.

THE LIGHTHOUSE LYMPHEDEMA NETWORK

The Lighthouse Lymphedema Network is a non-profit 501C3 organization. All donations to the LLN are tax-deductible. Donations may be sent to the address below.

Patients, family members, therapists, vendors, and other outside support keep our group energized to reach our goals of education, awareness, and providing support. Through group meetings, newsletters, educational/awareness events, publicity, participation in medical events and fundraisers, such as the Walk for Lymphedema, the LLN promotes interest in a serious medical condition. Through the efforts of the Lighthouse Lymphedema Network, October 22nd has been declared the State of Georgia annual Lymphedema Education and Awareness Day.

The LLN welcomes members to become involved in helping us to achieve our goals.

Become active!
Become an advocate!
Become a contributor by serving
on one of our many committees!
You can make a difference!

Please contact us at:

***LIGHTHOUSE LYMPHEDEMA
NETWORK
10240 Crescent Ridge Drive
Roswell, GA 30076
Phone 770-442-1317***

For information:

www.lymphedemalighthouse.org

SHEDDING LIGHT ON LYMPHEDEMA

www.lymphedemalighthouse.org

LIGHTHOUSE LYMPHEDEMA NETWORK



WHAT IS LYMPHEDEMA?

Lymphedema is swelling of a body part caused by an abnormal accumulation of fluid, proteins, and cellular waste in the tissues under the skin. It occurs when there is a problem in the lymphatic system:

- The failure of lymph vessels to develop properly
- Damage to lymph vessels by trauma, surgery, or infection
- Removal or destruction of lymph nodes, usually during treatment for cancer

Lymphedema can be a painful and disfiguring condition. It can lead to decreased mobility, repeated episodes of infections (cellulites, erysipelas, lymphangitis), and depression. It can require constant medical care and expense. Severe cases involve thickening of the skin, hardening of the tissues (fibrosis), leaking of fluid, massive swelling, and skin changes such as warty growths. The extreme version of lymphedema is called elephantiasis when the limb becomes enormous and distorted, with drastic changes in the skin and tissue.

Even when the lymphedema is relatively mild, it can make wearing regular clothes more difficult, limit your activities, and put you at risk for infections. Because lymphedema is a chronic progressive condition, even mild cases can eventually escalate and have serious consequences.

THE LYMPHATIC SYSTEM

The lymph system consists of a network of lymph vessels traveling to lymph nodes carrying lymph fluid. The lymph vessels are located all over the body, usually next to veins. They transport lymph fluid – the excess fluid in the tissues which is filled with proteins, white blood cells, germs, and cellular waste products. This lymph fluid is carried up to the lymph nodes where it is filtered and detoxified before being returned to the blood stream.

You have 500-1000 lymph nodes located all around your body:

- The neck (supraclavicular and cervical)
- The armpits (axilla)
- Along the windpipe (trachea)
- Adjacent to the lung (bronchial)
- In the chest cavity (thoracic)
- Along the intestine (abdominal)
- Behind the abdominal cavity (retroperitoneal)
- The pelvic area – The groin area (inguinal)

Lymph tissue is also found in the tonsils, spleen, intestinal wall and bone marrow.

WHAT CAUSES LYMPHEDEMA?

There are two general types of lymphedema:

Primary Lymphedema usually appears without obvious cause or after a minor traumatic event or an infection. It can happen at any age, but is due to a congenital abnormality, usually involving malformation or non-formation of lymph vessels.

Secondary Lymphedema is an acquired condition resulting from loss or obstruction of previously normal lymph pathways. It often occurs after a surgical procedure where lymph nodes or lymph vessels have been removed or damaged. Surgery and/or radiation for cancer treatment is one of the most common causes. People who have had treatment for breast cancer, melanomas, prostate cancer, ovarian, cervical, or uterine cancer, or lymphomas are all at risk, although the swelling may not appear until months or even years later.

The rate of progression of lymphedema varies with temperature, humidity, activities and the number of infections complication.

In the case of arm lymphedema after axillary surgery or radiation therapy (or both) the lymphedema is often more distressing to the person than the mastectomy or lumpectomy because the person must deal with lymphedema and its complications for life.

In the legs, lymphedema is more distressing, because people must deal with a variety of special problems, such as different shoe size for each foot, difficulty walking, excessive fatigue from heavy lower extremities, back pain, diminished agility, feeling forced into a sedentary lifestyle.

PNEUMATIC COMPRESSION PUMP

The international experts in the field of lymphology agree that the use of pneumatic compression pumps has many disadvantages. The affected limb usually resumes swelling when pump use is discontinued. The pump is essentially forcing fluid from a congested limb to a congested trunk. Without CDT, the lymphatic system is not cleared for proper lymphatic flow. When the lymphedema involves a lower extremity, the external genitalia and/or the abdominal region sometimes will swell as a result of pump therapy.

TREATMENT FOR LYMPHEDEMA

Lymphedema is not curable but it is controllable. The aim of treatment is to improve appearance, increase function, and prevent further progression of the swelling. Treatment should begin as soon as lymphedema is diagnosed. If left untreated, lymphedema can result in irreversible damage. However, treatment can be effective even for people who have had lymphedema for many years.

The best and most effective treatment for lymphedema is Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT) which has five major components:

1. **Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD)** is a gentle massage-like technique. It opens the collateral lymphatic pathways to move the excess fluid to areas where the lymph system is functioning.
2. **Compression Therapy/Bandaging and Garments** are an essential component of lymphedema management. Keeping the limb wrapped in a multi-layer low stretch bandage during treatment can decrease the excess fluid and help to soften the tissues. After treatment, a strong gradient compression stocking or sleeve can help maintain results.
3. **Exercise** according to recommended CDT protocols can help stimulate the lymphatic system and get the fluid moving.
4. **Meticulous skin and Nail Care** is crucial on the affected limb to avoid cracking and infections. Using low pH soaps and lotions can help protect against bacteria.
5. **Excellent Nutrition** is also important. Avoid fatty foods and salt: eat lots of fresh fruits and vegetables. Controlling your weight is necessary because studies have found that obesity aggravates lymphedema. Avoid excessive use of caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol.

DIAGNOSTIC TEST FOR LYMPHEDEMA

Lymphoscintigraphy is the “gold standard” for evaluating lymphatic function and for diagnosing lymphedema. It is minimally invasive and does not damage the visualized lymph vessels.