



Patient Education Sheet

Oncology Nursing Society
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How Can I Manage Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is the accumulation of lymph fluid, which causes one or more body parts to swell up. Lymphedema is not curable, but it can be managed easily with therapy.

Here are simple tips and techniques that you can discuss with your healthcare provider to relieve lymphedema.

Most Helpful

- **Complete decongestive therapy (CDT):** This therapy can reduce swelling in body parts, improve your ability to move your shoulders, and decrease pain. CDT has two phases. In phase I, your healthcare providers will care for your skin, drain the lymph fluid, and compress the swollen area with bandages. In phase II, you will receive movement therapies and learn basic exercises, as well as receive education on managing your lymphedema in the future.
- **Compression bandaging:** Tightly wrapping affected body parts can prevent swelling and stop lymphedema from recurring. Your healthcare provider will monitor you closely during this treatment.
- **Infection treatment:** Lymphedema increases your risk for infection. You should go to the hospital if you experience hypotension, rapid heartbeat, fever, confusion, or vomiting. Spotting infection early is important so you can receive the best possible treatment. Your healthcare provider may give you oral penicillin for at least two weeks. Take your medications exactly as prescribed or infection may recur.

Likely to Be Helpful

- **Maintain a healthy body weight:** Maintaining a healthy weight according to the BMI (body mass index) can reduce swelling and make your lymphedema more manageable. If your BMI score is higher than 30, you may have a higher risk for lymphedema. Women who develop lymphedema after breast cancer treatment should be particularly careful to watch their weight.
- **Manual lymph drainage:** Draining lymph fluid should only be done by a qualified practitioner (you and your healthcare provider can visit www.clt-lana.org or www.lymphnet.org for more information). Drainage is effective if lymphedema is spotted early and in breast, chest, head and neck, and genital lymphedema. It also can relieve your symptoms.
- **Skin care:** Wash with neutral soaps to avoid drying the skin, and be sure to keep skin folds clean and dry. Inspect often for cuts, scrapes, and insect bites. Avoid using scented products. Vegetable-based products are better than mineral oil- or petroleum-based products if you live in a hot climate.

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May or May Not Be Helpful

- **Exercise:** Regular physical activity can improve your ability to move your arms, reduce heaviness and stiffness in your arms and legs, and improve your range of movement. If you are interested in exercise, talk to your healthcare provider and ask him or her to discuss the risks and benefits.
- **Antibiotics:** Your healthcare provider may prescribe certain medications, such as amoxicillin, to reduce infection caused by lymphedema. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about any drug allergies you might have.

Not Enough Evidence

Although you may find that these techniques work for you, not enough studies have been done to show that they work to alleviate lymphedema.

- Compression garments
- Hyperbaric oxygen
- Low-level laser therapy
- Nanocrystalline silver dressing on lymphatic ulcers
- Pneumatic compression pump
- Simple lymph drainage
- Surgical intervention

Questions for Your Healthcare Provider

Always consult your healthcare provider before adding any new treatments or other interventions into your routine.