

Lymphedema and Available Treatment Options

The lymph system helps to get rid of waste products from your cells and helps your body fight infection. Lymphedema (lim-fe-dee'-ma) can happen when the lymph nodes are not able to drain the fluids out of your body tissues. It is often seen as swelling in your arms or legs.

There are two types of Lymphedema:

Primary Lymphedema

This is when people are born without the ability to manage the fluid. This problem may be seen at birth, or later, during puberty or adulthood.

Secondary Lymphedema

This type of Lymphedema can happen when something damages the lymphatic system, such as: surgery, infection, chemotherapy or radiation therapy.

Symptoms of Lymphedema may include:

- Swelling or tightness
- Heaviness
- Decreased ability to bend and move the arm or leg
- Discomfort in the affected joint
- Increased risk of infection in the arm or leg

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

Surgical and Non-Surgical Lymphedema Treatments

Non-Surgical Treatments

Non-surgical treatment is called complex decongestive therapy (CDT) which includes massage, exercise and compression.

Massage

There are two basic types of massage used to treat Lymphedema:

- Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD) is a specific and gentle form of massage that helps move the fluid to other parts of the body for clearance. You should only do this massage if you have been instructed by a physical therapist.
- Soft tissue mobilization (myofascial release) is a type of massage done by a therapist to loosen scar tissue and other tightness that may cause swelling.

Exercise

Stretching can help loosen the tissues and exercises to improve strength and range-of-motion can help fluid flow more easily. Exercise may also be helpful with weight control, which is an important part of Lymphedema therapy. A certified Lymphedema therapist can help develop a program that is right for you.

Compression Garments

Elastic fabric garments like support stockings are used to put pressure on the arm or leg to help move fluid out and to keep new fluid from building up.

Bandaging

Cotton, low-stretch bandages are used to put constant pressure on the arm or leg.

Skin Care

It is important to take special care of your arm or leg to help reduce the risk of injury and infection. Keep your arm or leg clean and use lotion every day to prevent dryness.

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Surgical Treatments

For many patients, surgery may help treat the symptoms of Lymphedema. Surgery to treat Lymphedema is done under general anesthesia and takes about 4 to 6 hours. Your activities will be limited for a period of time after surgery. The number of activity restrictions will depend on the type of surgery that is done and if an arm or leg is involved.

Your surgeon may want you to have a diagnostic test which injects Indocyanine Green Dye (ICG) into the affected leg or arm to find out how much Lymphedema is present and to help make plans for your surgery.

Types of Lymphedema Surgery

Lymphovenular Bypass

The surgeon makes several small cuts (incisions) about one inch long in the affected arm or leg and connects the lymph channel(s) to vein(s). This surgery redirects the lymphatic fluid to these small veins to help remove the fluid from the area. Your hospital stay will be less than 24 hours.

Vascularized Lymph Node Transfer

Using microsurgery, the surgeon removes lymph nodes from the abdomen and transplants them to the affected arm or leg, then reattaches their blood supply. Your hospital stay will be 4 to 7 days.

Liposuction for Lipedema

In some cases liposuction or other procedures may be used to help remove the fluid.

Frequently Asked Questions About Surgical Treatment

Who can have this surgery?

This treatment may be an option for any patient with Lymphedema. Talk to your doctor to see if this surgery is right for you. Those who have had Lymphedema for a shorter time are more likely to have better results with this surgery.

What should I expect from this surgery?

Many patients see improvement, but the results are different for each person. The surgery does not help every patient and does not cure Lymphedema. The surgery may help to:

- Reduce the amount and spread of the Lymphedema
- Reverse some of the changes seen in the affected arm or leg
- Decrease the pain, heaviness and risk of infection

You will be evaluated by one of our certified Lymphedema therapists and exact measurements will be done before and after the surgery. These measurements will help record your improvement and determine if there is a need for follow-up care.

Will I still need Lymphedema Treatment after surgery?

While you may see improvement after surgery, your surgeon will decide what plan is best for you. To have the best result, you may be asked to keep wearing your compression garment and continue with massages, exercises and good skin care. You may also need to work with your Lymphedema specialist after surgery.

Will my health insurance pay for this surgery?

Every insurance plan is different. Call your insurance company for specific information about your policy and coverage for this type of surgery.