

Lymphedema

*What every cancer patient
needs to know*



Simcoe Muskoka
Regional Cancer Program



Royal Victoria
Regional Health Centre

A Cancer Care Ontario Partner

In this booklet you will learn about:

- What is lymphedema
- What causes lymphedema
- Signs and symptoms of lymphedema
- Treatment for lymphedema
- Where to get help
- Financial support to help pay for lymphedema supplies and therapist visits

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema (pronounced lim-fe-DEE-ma) is a side effect that can begin during or after cancer treatment.

Lymphedema is the swelling of the soft tissues. This can occur in the arms, legs, chest/trunk, and pelvic/genital areas.

What causes lymphedema?

For cancer patients, lymphedema is usually caused by the removal of or damage to your lymph nodes as part of your cancer treatment (surgery or radiation).

Lymphedema is most likely to appear in area that is closest to the lymph nodes that were removed/damaged. For example, if you had surgery to your left breast and had lymph nodes removed from your left underarm, you may develop swelling in the left arm. If you develop lymphedema on your left arm, we would call your left arm the affected limb.

As lymph nodes are removed or damaged, it can be more difficult for the lymph fluid to flow through the body. It's similar to a highway—when there's a lane closure, a traffic jam occurs. In this case, because of the removed or damaged lymph nodes, the lymph fluid builds up and causes swelling.

Lymphedema can happen just weeks after surgery, or years after your initial cancer treatment. The risk factors of lymphedema include: extensive surgery, number of lymph nodes removed during surgery, radiation treatment to lymph nodes, and being overweight.

Lymphedema is a chronic condition, but it can be treated and well controlled.

How do I know if I have lymphedema?

You may notice these signs and symptoms in the affected area:

- Feeling of heaviness, tightness
- A bursting sensation, sense of fullness
- Shooting pain, pins and needles, discomfort or aching
- Swelling or puffiness
- Less flexibility in the affected joint(s) due to swelling/ edema
- Tight fitting clothing, watch or jewellery in one specific area

If you have these signs and symptoms, talk to your doctor. The sooner lymphedema is diagnosed and treated, the better the treatment outcomes.

How can lymphedema be treated?

Combined Decongestive Therapy (CDT) is the current gold standard in treating lymphedema. It is a combination of using Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD), compression therapy, skin care, exercises and education.

Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD)

A specialized massage technique performed by qualified therapists that redirects lymphatic fluid from the swollen area back to your bloodstream.

Compression therapy

In compression wrapping, multi-layered bandages are applied to reduce the size and improve the density of the swollen limb.

Compression garments are used to maintain/control the size of the limb (e.g. once the swelling has improved).

The right compression garment should be:

- well-fitting
- supports the affected limb during activity (e.g. during exercise, housework, work).



Image compliments of BSN Medical.

For information on where to buy products for lymphedema, please visit <http://www.lymphontario.ca/marketplace.html>

How can lymphedema be treated?

Skin Care

The goal of proper skin care is to prevent infections (cellulitis), and in turn, lessen the chance of lymphedema in the affected limb.

Things to do for affected limb:

- Keep skin clean and in good condition.
- Apply moisturizer daily to prevent chapping/chaffing of skin.
- Use sunscreen and insect repellent.
- Wear gloves while doing activities that may cause skin injury (e.g. gardening, working with tools, using chemicals such as detergents).
- If scratches/punctures to skin occur, wash with soap and water. Apply antibiotic on scratch/puncture, and watch for signs of infection (see below box for signs).
- If possible, avoid injections, blood draws, vaccinations and acupuncture in the affected limb.

If you develop a rash, itch, redness, pain, increased skin temperature in the affected limb, fever or flu-like symptom, see your doctor right away.

How can lymphedema be treated?

Exercise

Flexibility, strengthening, and aerobic activities are used to enhance lymphatic flow, control the lymphedema, and maintain a healthy weight. If you are having trouble moving the affected area, exercises can also improve the range of motion. Exercise can also improve strength of weakened/deconditioned muscles.

Things to do:

- Slowly build up the duration and intensity of any activity or exercise
- Take frequent rest periods during activity to allow the affected limb to recover
- Monitor your hands and feet during and after activity for any change in size, shape, tissue, texture, soreness, heaviness or firmness.

These tips are a general guide to help patients with lymphedema manage their symptoms. Please talk to your doctor, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, or lymphedema therapist about specific things you can do for your lymphedema.

Funding for compression garments

If you qualify, the Government of Ontario has an Assistive Devices Program (ADP) which pays up to 75 per cent of the cost of compression garments for lymphedema. For more information, please contact:

Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care
Assistive Devices Program
Toll-free 1-800-268-6021 TDD/TTY 1-800-387-5559
e-mail: adp@ontario.ca
Website: www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/programs/adp/

For more information

Lymphedema Association of Ontario
www.lymphontario.ca

Canada Lymphedema Framework
<http://canadalymph.ca/>

Pathways magazine—for lymphedema patients
www.canadalymph.ca/pathways

Breastcancer.org — lymphedema
www.breastcancer.org/treatment/lymphedema

These websites offer general information to help patients with lymphedema manage their symptoms. The information may not apply to your specific case. Please talk to your doctor, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, or lymphedema therapist to make sure the information/advice is suitable for your situation.

Finding a local therapist

Therapists qualified to treat lymphedema must have specialized training in Combined Decongestive Therapy (CDT). Please refer to www.cancer.ca, www.lymphontario.ca or your phone book for local listings of clinics and qualified therapists trained in CDT.

Financial help

Your private insurance plan may be able to help you with paying for your lymphedema garments and/or therapist visits. If not, try contacting charitable organizations for financial help. Ask us for a copy of the *Financial Support Information* sheet for a list of these organizations. It's also available online at www.rvh.on.ca.

SMRCP Lymphedema Clinic

To access the Lymphedema Clinic Simcoe Muskoka Regional Cancer Program (SMRCP), you need to be a patient of the SMRCP, and you will need a referral from your physician. Talk to your nurse or oncologist, or call the Patient and Family Support for more information: Phone: 705-728-9090 Ext. 43520

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