

Comprehensive Lymphedema Treatment Program

What is Lymphedema?

The **lymphatic system** is part of the body's circulatory system. Its vessels (lymphatics) run alongside veins and collect body fluid from tissues for return to the bloodstream. The body also produces lymphocytes to fight disease. Removal of bacteria and excess protein molecules from the body is a vital part of lymphatic function. When the lymphatic system does not drain fluid from the tissues, swelling (edema) occurs.

Lymphedema is a chronic swelling affecting one or more body areas. This occurs when lymph vessels or nodes are not working sufficiently, are blocked, or have been removed.

If this condition goes untreated, the protein-rich fluid accumulates in the tissues. It also creates an environment for bacteria to grow, increasing the possibility of infection. If the swelling and inflammation persist, the tissue thickens and becomes very firm. The result may be skin breakdown, pain, an enlarged and heavy limb, decreased range of motion, and problems with everyday living skills.

There are two types of lymphedema:

- ♦ **Primary lymphedema** may be present at birth or develop at any time for unknown reasons.
- ♦ **Secondary lymphedema** is more common. It is most frequently caused by lymph node resection, radiation therapy, or scarring from infection.

What Treatments Do We Offer?

The first step is **evaluation** by a therapist who is specifically trained and certified to treat lymphedema. This comprehensive evaluation may take up to two hours.

After evaluation, an individualized treatment program is designed, including:

- ♦ **Manual lymphatic drainage**, a specialized non-invasive technique that stimulates the lymphatic vessels to absorb stagnant lymph fluid. It also helps the body re-route fluid drainage into properly working lymph channels.
- ♦ **Compression bandaging** of the limb to prevent fluid from re-accumulating between manual drainage treatments. The bandaging pressure replaces the compromised skin and tissue pressure.
- ♦ **Individually designed exercise programs**, used in conjunction with compression bandaging to enhance lymphatic drainage as well as to restore strength, flexibility, and endurance.
- ♦ **Sequential compression pumping**, used as needed to soften firm tissue and to reduce edema further. The pumps are used at very low pressure.
- ♦ **Education in self-management**, to teach the client how to care for damaged skin and prevent recurrence of lymphedema. The client also learns a modified method of manual lymph drainage.
- ♦ **Assessment of impact on daily living activities**, which determines methods and modifications that will assure the client's highest level of independent functioning - at home and at work.

What are the Treatment Goals?

- ♦ To decrease the lymphedema as much as possible;
- ♦ To enable the client to understand the problem;
- ♦ To help the client adapt his/her lifestyle to prevent recurrence of edema and manage his/her own care.