

Lymphedema

What is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is chronic (long term) swelling, usually of arms and legs. Lymphedema happens when a certain type of fluid (called “lymph”) builds up in your body. This swelling can cause:

- Pain, irritation, and infection of the affected skin and tissues
- Scars and fat buildup in the affected limb
- Difficulty with daily activities

It’s caused by problems with your lymphatic system. There is no cure for lymphedema, but it can be managed.

What is the Lymphatic System?

The lymphatic system is an important part of the immune system. It helps to clear away infections and maintains the right amount of fluid in your body. The lymphatic system is made up of organs, tissues, and vessels that help keep the body clean by getting rid of waste and toxins. The lymphatic system also takes care of fluids that leak out of our blood vessels into the tissues.

What Causes Lymphedema?

Primary Lymphedema

A person can be born with lymphatic system problems. This is called primary lymphedema. We don’t know the causes of primary lymphedema. It can cause swelling in arms, legs, or other parts of the body. You may not have symptoms of primary lymphedema until later in life. Primary lymphedema can be passed down from one family member to another (inherited). People can also have primary lymphedema without any family history. Sometimes, primary lymphedema is part of a syndrome like:

- Turner’s syndrome
- Noonan’s syndrome
- Klinefelter syndrome
- Lymphedema-Distichiasis syndrome

Secondary Lymphedema

If your lymphatic system is damaged, this can cause secondary lymphedema. Some common causes of damage to the lymphatic system are:

- Surgery to treat cancer.
- Injury
- Infection of the lymphatic system by parasites (tiny bugs that use other living things, such as your body, for food and a place to live)

How is Lymphedema Diagnosed?

Lymphedema can be diagnosed by your doctor based on your symptoms and doctor’s examination. You may need to have scans or blood work to rule out other causes of swelling.



What are the Symptoms of Lymphedema?

A person with lymphedema may notice these symptoms:

- You may have swelling in an arm, leg, or other area that comes and goes regularly.
- An arm, leg, or other area of your body may feel heavy or achy.
- You may have light tingling in an arm, leg, or other area of your body.
- Your clothes or shoes might feel tight or not fit.
- Jewelry that was comfortable to wear is now difficult to get on and off.

Doctors may notice these signs and symptoms in people with lymphedema:

- Swollen arm or leg.
- Asymmetry (one of your arms or legs may look very different from the other because of swelling).
- Skin changes in the swollen area such as, being thicker or firmer or having “pitting.” Pitting is when a swollen part of your body has a dimple or pit after you press it for a few seconds.
- Fingernails or toenails on your affected arm or leg looking different.

How is Lymphedema Treated?

If you have mild swelling, treatment will help move the lymph fluid away from the swollen area. This can be done by:

- Elevating (lifting up) the swollen area so it is higher than your heart.
- Wearing compression garments. These are pieces of clothing that fit tight around the skin. The tight fit helps swelling to go down.
- Exercise

If your swelling gets worse, you may need what is called Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT). CDT can be done by a physical therapist or occupational therapist. It includes:

- Manual Lymph Drainage (MLD) – This is a gentle massage that helps move lymph fluid away from the swollen area.
 - ▶ After MLD, you can care for lymphedema at home by:
 - Using compression garments
 - Getting regular exercise
 - Taking care of your skin and nails
 - Eating a healthy diet
 - Drinking plenty of water
- Compression Therapy – This uses several layers of bandages to help move fluid away from the swollen area. Once the swelling has gone down, you can wear a compression garment to help prevent further swelling.
- Skin and nail care – Taking good care of the skin and nails can help prevent infection.
- Exercise and Movement – This helps your blood flow all through your body. It also helps move lymph fluid around which can lower your swelling.

IHTC physical therapists will refer you for custom compression garments. We can also help you find a physical therapist or occupational therapist in your area that treats lymphedema.

