

What is Lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema occurs when the lymphatic system does not function properly.

The lymphatic system is a very important system. It is made up of tiny vessels which help to remove extra fluid from your tissues back into circulation. Lymph nodes (also known as glands) are located along these vessels and work to clean the extra fluid by removing bacteria and dead or abnormal cells. This helps to prevent any infections entering our circulation.

If the lymphatic system in a particular area is not working properly, extra fluid can build up in the tissues creating swelling known as lymphoedema. This fluid is characterized by having high levels of protein in it.

Most commonly lymphoedema occurs in the arms and legs but lymphoedema can also affect the head, neck, abdomen and genitals.

While swelling is the most common symptom of lymphoedema, others include a feeling of tightness or heaviness, and sometimes pain in the affected area.

What Causes Lymphoedema ?

The causes of lymphoedema are divided into two main groups.

Primary Lymphoedema

In some people the lymphatic system doesn't develop normally. Either there are not enough vessels or the vessels don't function properly. This is usually detected during childhood.

Family members of someone who has been known to have had lymphoedema are more likely to also be affected.

Secondary Lymphoedema

This type is caused by damage to an otherwise normal, healthy lymphatic system. As the lymphatic vessels and nodes are located so close to the skin, something as simple as a mosquito bite or scratch can trigger lymphoedema.

In the developed world, lymphoedema most commonly occurs as the result of cancer related surgery or radiation. While such therapies are necessary in the treatment of cancer, the lymphatic system can be damaged in the process, leading to signs and symptoms of lymphoedema.

What Can I Do ?

Anyone who is at risk of lymphoedema should see a lymphoedema therapist.

People who are at risk include anyone who's ever had;

- A lumpectomy
- A mastectomy
- A sentinel node biopsy
- An axillary clearance
- Gynaecological or prostate cancer surgery or radiation
- Other surgery or radiation

Symptoms such as swelling and pain may not necessarily occur immediately after these treatments. For this reason if you've had any of the above it's a good idea to see a lymphoedema therapist even if you have no symptoms.

There are lots of simple things that can be done to prevent lymphoedema from occurring. Your lymphoedema therapist can give you advice regarding how to reduce your chances of developing lymphoedema and also assist you with ways to minimise any symptoms you may experience.

How Can the Lymphoedema Physiotherapy Service Help?

The physiotherapy department now has two lymphoedema therapists who can offer a range of treatment and management options.

We can provide you with an improved knowledge and understanding of the lymphatic system, how it works and why lymphoedema occurs.

There are some simple exercises and daily routines that we can teach you in order to minimise your symptoms.

If appropriate a specialised individual bandaging program can be done in an effort to reduce the amount of swelling in the affected area.

Our lymphoedema therapists can also provide a specialised form of massage called manual lymphatic drainage which aims to reduce the amount of swelling in the affected area.

Compression garments can be ordered and fitted by our lymphoedema therapist's.

Our consulting room provides a comfortable, private environment where the physiotherapist can thoroughly and effectively assess and manage your lymphoedema risk factors and symptoms.

We are committed to a team approach with medical care givers.

Accessing the Lymphoedema Physiotherapy Service

No referral is necessary although referrals from medical practitioners and results of relevant tests are welcomed.

Cost: Free



This program is supported by funding from the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments under the HACC program.

Lymphoedema Physiotherapy Service



Physiotherapy service specialising in the prevention, management and treatment of lymphoedema

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