

## Lymphedema and Chronic Edema

Lymphedema (LE) is a disease where a patient experiences chronic edema due to an accumulation of protein rich fluid (lymph) collecting under the skin, typically in upper or lower limbs. Damage to the lymphatic system, either genetic or as a result of trauma, surgery cancer treatment or other causes, prevents the lymph fluid being pumped back into the circulatory system. Chronic swelling can cause the skin to thicken, crack and scale unless cared for.

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### Stages

Stages 0-1 / Early Onset: effective management can hold edema at this stage. Left untreated the edema will progress through Stages 2-3 or 4.

Elephantiasis, a recognised example of stage 4, can result in open, non-healing ulcers and a woody appearance of the skin.

### Causes

Primary: genetic malformation of the lymph system.

Secondary: due to removal of lymph nodes or damage to the lymph system during chemo, radiation, and other physical traumas.

## Impact on the Patient's Quality of Life

Can affect mobility and therefore the ability to work. Patients have difficulty finding clothes to fit. Condition influences self-confidence and self-esteem.

There are an estimated 1 million cases of this incurable disease in Canada (Limprint study 2019). The condition is often under-diagnosed and under-treated, leading to complications.

## Treatment and Care of Condition

Conventional treatment for lymphedema includes manual lymphatic massage (MLD), the use of compression bandages and garments, plus skin care and exercise. This approach, known as Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT), is designed to minimize the accumulation of lymphatic fluid within the soft tissue of the affected limb. It is important to start treatment of LE in the early stages (0-2) when it can have the most impact.



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