

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.

There are an estimated one million cases of this incurable disease in Canada. Lymphedema is often under-diagnosed and under-treated, leading to life-threatening complications, pain, and a significant impact on quality of life.

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Stages

Stages 0-1 / Early Onset: effective management at an early stage can hold the level of swelling. Left untreated, the edema will progress through Stages 2-3 or 4, with increasing limitations on mobility and ability to work.

Elephantiasis, a recognised example of stage 4. Chronic swelling can cause the skin to thicken, crack and scale or become ulcerated. Daily skin care is an important part of treatment.

Causes

Primary: Genetic malformation of the lymph system, either present at birth or may develop at puberty or around mid-life.

Secondary: Due to physical traumas from a variety of workplace or life events, obesity, which puts extra strain on the lymph system. In addition, cancer surgery, including lymph node removal, chemo, and radiation therapy are predominant causes of Lymphedema.

Impact on the Patient's Quality of Life

Lymphedema can affect mobility and therefore the ability to work. Patients have difficulty finding clothes or shoes to fit, which influences self-confidence and self-esteem.

Treatment and Care of Condition

Conventional treatment for lymphedema includes Manual Lymph Drainage (MLD) either from a trained therapist or self MLD, the use of compression bandages and garments, plus skin care and exercise. This approach, known as "Conservative Management," is designed to minimize the accumulation of lymphatic fluid within the soft tissue of the affected limb. It is important to start treatment of lymphedema in the early stages (0-1) when it can have the most impact.



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