

Body weight

A sedentary lifestyle and the use of certain medications and/or treatments can be associated with weight gain. It is important to try to stabilize your weight. Overweight and obesity are associated with a worsening of lymphedema. There are still no specific dietary recommendations for lymphedema. It is preferable to follow a balanced and varied diet.

Self-measurement

Self-measurement is a quick and easy way to check the condition of a lymphoedematous limb. Take measurements once a month if your lymphedema is stable, and more often if it varies. Keep a record of your measurements. If your limb swells further and self-bandaging isn't enough to stop the increase, consult your therapist. For more details, visit www.infolympo.ca

Exercise guidelines

- If your condition allows, walking can be an exercise you can undertake at any time.
- Get your doctor's and/or therapist's approval before starting or resuming any exercise program.
- Studies show that exercise is beneficial, and that it must be adapted to each individual. Listen to your body, and rest when necessary.
- Whether you're starting a new physical activity or resuming a training program, you need to **progress slowly**, at your own pace, and be alert to any changes in swelling.
- It's important to do exercise that you enjoy. Ask your therapist or qualified professional how to adapt exercise to your reality.
- It may be a good idea to measure the limb once a month, or before undertaking any new physical activity.
- Depending on the type of exercise and/or your sweat level, a compression garment may be worn during and/or after exercise; an old compression garment may also be used during exercise.
- Swimming, water exercise, walking, moderate cycling, dancing, light aerobic exercise, gentle yoga and any exercise specifically adapted for lymphedema are beneficial for general health. These activities are also recommended during and after cancer treatment.
- You can start resistance exercise as soon as your therapist has established that your lymphedema is stable. Progress slowly, using light weights and limiting repetitions, if possible, under the supervision of a qualified professional.

Air travel

There is little research to determine whether there is a risk of causing or aggravating lymphedema by air travel. However, it is recommended that lymphedema sufferers wear their compression garments tightly and move the affected limb frequently during the flight, especially on long flights.

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* Subject to change

Other recommendations

- Arm lymphedema:
 - As far as possible, avoid needle sticks, injections, blood tests and vaccinations on the side of the affected arm.*
 - Whenever possible, transfusion lines and Port-a-Cath should be placed on the unaffected side*.
 - Wear a well-fitting bra with wide, soft straps and well distributed support. Avoid wire bras.
 - Remove jewelry, watches and bracelets that are too tight.
- Leg lymphedema:
 - Wear comfortable socks, tights and underwear without tight elastic bands.
 - Avoid prolonged exposure to high heat, such as saunas, jacuzzis and overheated workout rooms.
 - As far as possible, avoid staying in the same position for too long.

*There is no clear scientific evidence that these procedures cause lymphedema. Given the current state of knowledge, caution is still called for.

Support the LAQ and contribute to patient
advocacy and the advancement
of lymphedema care.

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Your donations to the LAQ help us cope with a disease that has no cure... and keep hope alive!

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Tax receipts are issued for donations of \$10 or more.

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LIVING WELL WITH LYMPHEDEMA

TREATMENT, EXERCISE, SELF-MANAGEMENT

Who we are?

The Lymphedema Association of Québec (LAQ) is a non-profit organization founded in 1999.

Our mission is to educate, raise awareness, and support individuals affected by or at risk of developing lymphedema.

LAQ members include individuals living with lymphedema, those at risk, their families, friends, and healthcare professionals.

LAQ 

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What is the lymphatic system?

The lymphatic system is a one-way network that runs throughout the body. It plays a crucial role in the immune system and helps maintain fluid balance. Lymph nodes filter out harmful cells, supporting the body's defense mechanisms. Lymphatic vessels transport lymph (a fluid composed of proteins, waste, and immune cells) from tissues to the heart. The movement of lymph is facilitated by vessel contractions, muscle activity during exercise, and deep breathing.

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is a chronic condition characterized by swelling and inflammation due to an abnormal buildup of lymph fluid in body tissues. It most commonly affects the arms and/or legs but can also occur in other areas of the body.

Types of lymphedema

There are two main types of lymphedema:

Primary Lymphedema occurs due to a congenital abnormality in the lymphatic system. It can be present at birth or develop later in life.

Secondary Lymphedema results from damage to the lymphatic system due to trauma, cancer treatments, chronic venous insufficiency, or severe obesity. It may appear months or even years after treatment.

Lymphedema: signs and symptoms

- Gradual or sudden swelling, noticeable by indentations left by tight clothing or jewelry
- A sensation of heaviness, tightness, or fatigue in the affected limb or area
- Reduced flexibility and range of motion
- Mild discomfort or pain
- Increased swelling in hot, humid weather or after physical exertion

Early detection and treatment lead to better outcomes

Pay attention to symptoms and consult your doctor or a lymphedema therapist for an evaluation. Early treatment helps reduce swelling and prevent complications.

Lymphedema-related complications

- Infection (Cellulitis or Erysipelas): The most serious complication requiring immediate antibiotic treatment
- Delayed wound healing
- Hardening of the skin and tissues
- Limited flexibility
- Difficulty with daily activities and emotional distress

Seek immediate medical attention if you notice any of the following signs of cellulitis:

- Redness with defined edges, rash, or spreading itchiness;
- Increased swelling;
- Increased skin temperature;
- Sudden fever and chills (“flu-like” symptoms).

Managing lymphedema

Treatment focuses on reducing swelling through compression and improving lymphatic drainage. Your therapist will assess the stage and severity of your lymphedema and note your medical history before recommending an individualized treatment plan. Learning to manage your lymphedema through ongoing self-care is key to long-term success. Your therapist will give you the training, tools and resources to guide you.

Lymphedema treatment

Decongestive lymphatic therapy (DLT)

Decongestive Lymphatic Therapy (DLT) is an individualized treatment that combines compression, curative exercises, skin care and self-management education (including self-massage and selfbandaging) with manual therapy to enhance lymphatic circulation. DLT is currently considered the most effective treatment available. It begins with a decongestion phase, followed by a maintenance phase. Additional decongestion phases may be necessary. Therapists are specifically trained and certified to perform DLT. Consult the LAQ Lymphedema Guide, also available online at www.infolympho.ca, to find a certified therapist near you.

Compression therapy

Compression helps to stimulate lymphatic circulation and prevent fluid accumulation. Ideally, compression should be worn 24/7. Various compression options are available. The most common are:

- Multilayer compression bandaging (MCB) involves the application of several layers to the limb (protective, padding and compression bandages). MCBs are applied by certified therapists.
- Patients and caregivers should learn how to apply these bandages.
- Adjustable compression products involve the application of a compression garment with overlapping Velcro bands for adjustability.
- You can also find co-adhesive or single-bandage systems (e.g. Coban, Fast n’go system).

Curative exercises

A healthcare professional certified in lymphedema treatment will guide you through a series of curative exercises designed to help decongest the affected limb.

Skin care

It is essential to pay particular attention to the skin to reduce the risk of infection. This applies to both the decongestion phase and the maintenance phase.

- Clean with mild soap. Dry thoroughly, then apply a nonallergenic moisturizer to prevent chapping and irritation.

Manual therapy

A widely used form of manual therapy is manual lymphatic drainage (MLD). MLD is a gentle massage that stimulates lymphatic circulation and redirects lymphatic fluid to areas of the body where the lymphatic system is functioning properly. Other techniques can be used to reduce tissue hardening and/or restore tissue mobility, for example.

Maintenance and self-management

Once lymphedema has stabilized through Decongestive Lymphatic Therapy (DLT)—typically after about two weeks, depending on severity—your therapist will recommend the appropriate compression garment, and assist you in transitioning to selfmanagement.

Compression garments

Compression garments play a crucial role in long-term treatment. They are used when initial swelling is minimal, or to maintain the reduction achieved with DLT. Compression garments must be prescribed by a physician and fitted by a specialist in the art of measuring. They can be purchased ready-to-wear or made-to-measure, but must always fit well. Daytime compression garments are worn during the day, especially during periods of high activity. They should be removed at night. A variety of non-elastic and limited-elasticity compression products are available for both day and night wear. While waiting for your compression garment to arrive, self-bandaging is recommended to stabilize lymphedema (see below).

Education in self-management

Lymphedema is a condition that requires consistent daily care. Your therapist and/or a support group will provide guidance on self-management techniques, including self-bandaging, self-massage, and proper skin care.

Self-bandaging

In some cases, maintaining treatment results may require self-bandaging. Your therapist will teach you how to correctly apply bandages or a Velcro-based garment, promoting greater independence in managing your condition.

Self-massage

Your therapist will also train you in self-massage techniques, a simplified version of MLD aimed at improving lymphatic circulation.

Skin care

As with the decongestion phase, it is essential to pay particular attention to the skin during the maintenance phase.

- Avoid cuts, scratches, splinters and needle-sticks.
- Use an electric razor to prevent cuts and skin irritation
- In the event of a cut or scratch, clean wounds with soap, apply disinfectant and, if necessary, an antibiotic ointment.
- See medical attention at any sign of infection.
- Protect your skin with a high-SPF sunscreen to avoid sunburn, and use insect repellent to avoid insect bites.
- Protect your **hands, feet** and nails. Don't cut your cuticles.

When you receive a manicure/pedicure, inform the staff that you are at risk of lymphedema and that the equipment used must be properly sterilized.

- Arm lymphedema: Wear cut-resistant gloves for cooking, rubber gloves for household chores, gardening gloves for outdoor work.
- Leg lymphedema: Avoid walking barefoot. Wear closed shoes and comfortable socks.

Exercise, movement and deep breathing

If you're starting a new physical activity, or resuming a training program, follow the exercise guidelines in this brochure. Exercise, movement and deep breathing stimulate lymphatic circulation. To maintain normal function during and after decongestion therapy, it's best to keep moving and active. General exercise increases strength, preserves joint mobility, helps maintain a healthy weight and helps prevent injury. In general, be as active as possible outdoors.

Other treatments

Pneumatic pumps

Pneumatic pumps are sometimes used to treat lymphedema. However, they can give rise to complications by pushing fluids up the limb, causing swelling and hardening of the tissues above the treated area. Pumps are most effective when used in conjunction with DLT and under the supervision of a therapist.

Diuretics

Diuretics are not usually recommended for lymphedema, as they remove water and increase protein concentration, which can lead to tissue hardening and increased inflammation. However, you should continue to take this medication if it has been prescribed for another condition. Please discuss any questions you may have with your doctor.