

Treatments for lymphedema

If you experience early signs or symptoms of lymphedema, contact your physician. Treatments focus on the benefits of compression and improving lymphatic circulation to reduce and control swelling. Studies have shown that early intervention with compression garments can reduce symptoms over time. When lymphedema does occur, decongestive lymphatic therapy is considered the most effective treatment available today. When diagnosed early, compression garments and self-management can help manage lymphedema.

Decongestive lymphatic therapy (DLT)

Decongestive lymphatic therapy (DLT) is an individualized treatment that can combine compression, healing exercises, skin care and self-management education (including self-massage and self-compression) with manual therapy to promote lymphatic circulation. Therapists are specifically trained and certified to practice TLD. Consult the LAQ Lymphedema Guide, also available online at www.infolympo.ca, to find a certified therapist near you.

Compression garments

Compression garments are an essential part of long-term treatment. They are used when initial swelling is minimal, or to maintain the reduction achieved with DLT when swelling is more severe. Compression garments must be prescribed by a physician and fitted by a specialist in the art of measuring. They can be purchased off-the-shelf (sometimes for mild swelling) or made-to-measure, but must always fit properly. Elastic compression garments are worn during the day, especially during periods of high activity. They should be removed at night. There are a variety of non-elastic and limited-elasticity compression products, also known as nightwear, alternative garments or Velcro garments.

Self-management education

By participating in a support group or consulting a specialized therapist, you can learn how to manage lymphedema on a daily basis. You'll be introduced to self-massage, specific exercises and skin care. Meticulous skin care is crucial to maintaining skin integrity and preventing infection.

Whether with the LAQ or your lymphedema therapist, it's essential to learn how to observe yourself, adapt your activities and react appropriately. This is how at-risk and affected people can live well with lymphedema.

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a company involved in lymphedema care?
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* Subject to change

Lymphedema research and available resources

Lymphedema is an under-treated condition that is not recognized as a serious health problem. Physicians often fail to diagnose lymphedema. By improving clinical research, lymphedema and its treatments will enjoy greater recognition in the medical community and increased funding from our governments.

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

DONATE!

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

Give to the LAQ and help us:

Provide educational and support tools
for lymphedema patients.

•
Raise awareness among medical professionals.

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The LAQ is a registered charity (#816630644 RR0001).
Tax receipts are issued for donations of \$10 or more.

Updated: February 2025

Published by



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REDUCING THE RISK OF LYMPHEDEMA

RISK REDUCTION,
TREATMENT,
AND 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.



What is the lymphatic system?

The lymphatic system is a one-way network that extends throughout the body. It plays a vital role in the immune system and helps maintain fluid balance. Lymph nodes filter harmful cells, eliminating them through the body's defense system. Lymphatic vessels transport lymph—composed of fluid, proteins, and cellular debris—from body tissues to the heart. Lymphatic circulation is facilitated by the contraction of lymph vessels, muscle movement during exercise, and deep breathing.

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is swelling and inflammation caused by an abnormal accumulation of fluid and protein in body tissues. Lymphedema often becomes a chronic condition. It occurs most frequently in the arms and/or legs, but can affect the head, neck, trunk and genitals.

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
- Infection (cellulitis) in the affected area (see below)
- Clothing or jewelry feeling tighter

Do not ignore these symptoms. Consult your doctor immediately—early intervention helps limit swelling and prevent complications.

Cellulitis (infection)

Infection, called cellulitis (which has nothing to do with cosmetic cellulite on the thighs), is the biggest danger and requires immediate treatment with oral or intravenous antibiotics. This infection can be life-threatening and must be treated promptly.

Signs of cellulitis are:

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

Recommendations to reduce the risk of lymphedema

Exercise and deep breathing

Exercise is important for maintaining good general health. It is even more essential when the lymphatic system has been damaged, as it supports the muscular and respiratory pump, promoting lymphatic drainage and stimulating alternative lymphatic pathways.

Different types of exercise are available for different purposes: building strength, maintaining joint mobility, improving cardiovascular health, facilitating weight maintenance, improving fitness and preventing injury.

Whatever type of exercise you choose, it's important to do one(s) you enjoy! Ask a qualified professional how to adapt exercise to your reality.

- Get the approval of your doctor and/or a qualified professional before starting or resuming any exercise program.
- Whether you're starting a new physical activity or resuming a training program, it's important to progress slowly, at your own pace, being alert to any changes in swelling.
- All gentle exercise, especially aerobics, is recommended before and during cancer treatment.
- Examples of beneficial activities: walking (accessible and free), swimming and water exercise, light cycling, dance, gentle yoga, tai chi, Qi Gong, light aerobic exercise.
- Strength training can rebuild or restore strength, increase endurance and improve muscle tone and power.

- People who are already physically active (e.g. weight training and vigorous activities) can gradually resume their exercise program as determined by their doctor and/or a qualified professional.
- Resistance exercises should be performed gradually, starting with light weights, low repetitions and under the supervision by a qualified instructor.
- Studies show that exercise is beneficial, but each person is different. Listen to your body and rest as needed.
- If you feel swelling in your limb, take the time to measure both limbs once a month or before starting any new exercise program.
- The key is to stay as active as possible, according to your abilities, limitations and interests.
- Deep breathing is an easy-to-learn exercise that lowers blood pressure, heart rate and respiratory rate. Practicing it daily for 10 minutes can have a major positive impact on stimulating lymphatic circulation.

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.

Skin care

It's important to protect the skin and give it meticulous care to reduce the risk of infection.

- Clean skin thoroughly with a mild soap, dry well and apply a moisturizing cream.
- Prevent cuts, scratches, splinters and bites.
- In the event of a cut or scrape, clean the wound with soap, apply a disinfectant and, if necessary, an antibiotic ointment.
- Watch out for any signs of infection and, at the slightest sign of trouble, consult a doctor immediately.
- Use an electric razor to avoid cuts and skin irritation.
- Protect your hands, feet and nails.
- Nail care: Do not cut your cuticles. When receiving a manicure/pedicure, inform the staff that you are at risk of lymphedema and that the equipment used must be properly sterilized.

With or at risk of arm lymphedema:

- We suggest you wear rubber gloves for household chores and gardening gloves for heavy-duty work.

Affected or at risk of leg lymphedema:

- Protect your feet and toes and ensure good foot hygiene. Avoid walking barefoot and wear close-fitting shoes and appropriate socks.

Protect your skin by using:

- High SPF sunscreen to prevent sunburn;
- A mosquito repellent to avoid insect bites and stings;
- A hypoallergenic moisturizer to prevent chapping and irritation.

Additional precautions

- Avoid prolonged exposure to high temperatures, such as in hot tubs, saunas and overheated workout rooms.
- Consider wearing a Lymphedema Alert bracelet during hospital visits.

At risk of arm lymphedema:

- If possible, avoid injections, blood tests or vaccinations on the affected arm*.
- Whenever possible, infusion lines and port-a-caths should be inserted on the unaffected side*.
- Remove all jewelry and watches that are too tight.
- Wear a well-fitting bra with wide pressure-distributing straps.

At risk of leg lymphedema:

- Wear stockings, compression garments and comfortable underwear without tight elastic bands.

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