

## WHAT IS LYMPHEDEMA?

Lymphedema is a disease that is characterized by swelling of a limb, trunk, head and neck or genital area that is the result of an accumulation of protein-rich fluid in the superficial tissues between the skin and muscle layers. Swelling may come on slowly or suddenly. In its earliest stage, the swelling may be intermittent.

There are two types of lymphedema:

- **Primary lymphedema** is due to congenital malformation of the lymphatic system that may be present at birth or develop later in life most often affecting the legs.
- **Secondary lymphedema** is more common and is due to damage to the lymphatic vessels or nodes often due to cancer treatment.

There is currently no cure for lymphedema. Lymphedema left untreated becomes chronic including progressively increasing swelling and hardening of tissue, infections, and even wounds in advanced stages.



## LYMPHEDEMA REHABILITATION



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## HOW DOES THE LYMPHATIC SYSTEM WORK?

The lymphatic system is a series of vessels that absorb and transport protein-rich lymph fluids from the body tissues to the regional lymph nodes and then return the fluids to the venous system. The initial lymph capillaries form a network that covers most of the body. Lymph nodes are important for protecting the body from disease. We have a set number of lymph nodes at birth, they do not regenerate if they are damaged or removed. The lymphatic system is important for working with the circulatory system to balance fluids in the body and returns 2-4 liters of fluid to the venous system in 24 hours. The lymphatic system also cleans out the tissue spaces and returns large proteins in the tissues back to the circulatory system.

## RELATIVE RISK OF DEVELOPING SECONDARY LYMPHEDEMA DUE TO CANCER

You have a higher relative risk for developing lymphedema if:

- You are a breast cancer survivor within the first 3-5 years post diagnosis but you continue to have a lower, lifelong risk
- You have had surgery that involves the removal of lymph node(s)
- Your cancer treatment included radiation
- Your cancer treatment included chemotherapy
- You are obese
- You have a history of seroma - a pocket of fluid that can develop after surgery
- You have Axillary Web Syndrome (visible tight cord of tissue underneath the skin in the area of the armpit and upper arm)
- You have been diagnosed with a higher stage of cancer
- You have had a post-operative infection

## EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF LYMPHEDEMA

- Feeling of heaviness or fullness in arm, leg, trunk
- Rings, watch, and/or bracelet feel tight but

- you have not gained weight
- Bra no longer fits the same
- Difficulty fitting your arm into jacket or shirt sleeves
- Difficulty fitting into your shoes
- Swelling may go away with rest or elevation or swelling that goes away at night
- Inability to see the normal tendons and veins on the back of the hand (compare one hand to the other)
- A new skin fold at the wrist and/or pocket of swelling on the back of the hand or foot
- Skin texture changes, feels tight or hard, or looks red
- New aching or discomfort in an area
- Additional sensations include numbness, pressure, a tingly feeling, and heat
- Less movement or flexibility in nearby joints, such as your shoulder, hand, wrist, knee, or ankle

## LYMPHEDEMA TREATMENT

Currently there is no cure for lymphedema.

Complete decongestive therapy (CDT) has been proven an effective, safe, non-invasive and cost effective treatment for lymphedema which reduces the risk factors associated with infection. Complete decongestive therapy includes the following:

- **Manual Lymph Drainage** – A manual technique is performed to open lymphatic pathways and move fluid to areas where it can be reabsorbed into the circulatory system
- **Multi-Layer Bandaging** – Short stretch compression bandages are used to create a gradient of pressure to move fluid and decrease swelling
- **Patient Education** – Precautions and prevention, skin care, self-manual lymphatic drainage and self-compression wrapping as indicated
- **Therapeutic Exercises** – Exercises specific to the needs of each individual patient
- **Facilitate Referral** for appropriate compression garment

Lymphedema treatment at McLaren Oakland is provided by **certified lymphedema therapists** along with a team of licensed physical therapists with advanced training in lymphedema management.

## GOALS OF THE LYMPHEDEMA REHABILITATION PROGRAM

- Prevent lymphedema
- Prevent infection
- Identify early warning signs of lymphedema
- Reduce protein-rich swelling in limb, trunk, head and neck and external genitalia when/if it occurs
- Decrease discomfort associated with swelling
- Ensure surgical scar mobility as it heals
- Reduction of fibrotic tissue/cording if present
- Regain normal motion and strength of joints and muscles affected to improve function
- Self-management of lymphedema

## COMMON DIAGNOSES/ TREATMENTS ASSOCIATED WITH LYMPHEDEMA

- Breast cancer surgery including mastectomy or lumpectomy with or without axillary/sentinel node dissection
- Other cancers including melanoma, gynecologic cancer, head and neck cancer and sarcoma
- Trauma to or infection of the lymphatic system
- Lipedema – a disorder of the fat
- Chronic venous insufficiency (Stage II & III)
- Swelling associated with Regional Pain Syndrome (Stage I and II)