

Living with Swelling or Edema

Understand your swelling. Find support. Move toward greater comfort.



Do your limbs feel heavy, tight, or puffy?

Edema is extra fluid trapped in body tissues. Learning what causes it is the first step toward getting the right care.

Lifestyle image is illustrative; people shown are not identified as patients.

What is the Lymphatic System?

Your lymphatic system is a network of tiny vessels, lymph nodes, and organs. It helps balance fluid in your body and supports your immune system.

Lymph: fluid on the move

Extra fluid around your cells enters lymph vessels. Once inside, this fluid is called lymph. The vessels carry it back toward your bloodstream.

Lymph nodes: small filters

Lymph nodes are small, bean-shaped structures found in areas such as your neck, armpits, and groin. They filter lymph and contain cells that help fight infection.

Why swelling can develop

When lymph vessels or nodes are damaged or cannot keep up with extra fluid, swelling can build up. This is called lymphedema.

Recognize the changes

Without swelling



Examples of swelling



Illustrations of legs and arms. These comparisons are not before-and-after treatment results.

Common signs

Puffy feet or hands; tight rings or shoes; heavy or aching limbs; stretched skin; stiffness; or changes in skin texture.

Not every swollen limb is lymphedema. A medical assessment can help find the cause.

Why does swelling happen?

Movement and veins

Long periods of sitting or standing, limited movement, and weak vein valves can let fluid collect in the legs.

Injury and treatment

Injury, inflammation, surgery, and cancer treatment involving lymph nodes or radiation may affect drainage.

Other health conditions

Heart, kidney, or liver problems and certain medicines may cause edema. Infection or a blood clot may cause swelling and need urgent medical care.

Effects on daily life

Swelling may make walking, climbing stairs, dressing, bathing, using your hands, sleeping, or staying active harder.

How can treatment help?

Manual lymphatic drainage

Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) is a gentle, hands-on technique. A trained therapist uses light, planned movements to guide lymph fluid toward areas that may drain better. It is not deep-tissue massage.

Possible benefits

When appropriate, MLD as part of a swelling-care program may reduce fluid buildup, ease heaviness or tightness, and improve comfort and movement. Results vary. MLD does not cure every cause of edema.

A plan for everyday life

Your care plan may include safe movement, skin care, compression garments or wraps when appropriate, and simple home routines.

Care at WholePerson Therapeutics

A certified manual lymphatic drainage occupational therapist can review your health history, check swelling and skin, and learn which activities are difficult.

When safe and appropriate, care may include MLD, movement, self-care training, compression education, and a home plan. We can coordinate with your medical team.

Insurance and payment

Medically necessary occupational therapy may be covered by health insurance. Coverage depends on your plan, eligibility, and referral or authorization rules. Coverage is not guaranteed. Private pay is accepted.

Call (203) 636-0065 to ask about a consultation.

When to get medical help

Call 911

Get emergency help for swelling with chest pain, trouble breathing, or fainting.

Seek prompt medical care

Get medical care for sudden or one-sided swelling, a red, hot, or painful limb, fever, or swelling that gets worse quickly.

MLD is not safe for everyone. Screening and medical clearance may be needed before treatment.

This guide is for education and does not replace medical advice.

Source for the lymphatic-system section: National Cancer Institute, “Lymph system” and “Lymph,” NCI Dictionary of Cancer Terms.

[Read the NCI explanation online](#)

Take the next step

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