

Lymphedema Prevention and Treatment

What Is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is a condition in which swelling occurs, most often in the arms or legs. It's caused by a buildup of protein and water in the body tissue, and it can affect both men and women.

Causes of Lymphedema

The lymph system is composed of lymph vessels, lymph nodes (those little hard glands you can feel in your neck and groin, and which are located throughout our bodies), and lymphatic fluid, called lymph. When it works properly, the lymph system carries wastes and excess fluid to two large vessels that drain into veins in the chest, thus returning to the body's circulation. From there the wastes and excess fluid go to the kidneys to be disposed of.


When the lymph system in a part of the body is slowed or blocked, drainage in that part of the body is interrupted. This causes the tissues in that area to swell up with excess fluid.

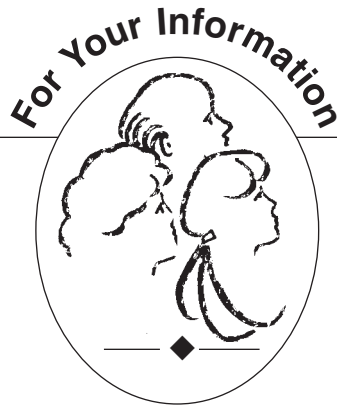
There are two kinds of lymphedema:

- **Primary lymphedema** has no known cause. It is the result of missing or damaged lymph nodes or vessels, usually because of a congenital defect in the lymphatic system (present in the body at birth). It can occur in the arms or legs, and can begin during adolescence or during adulthood.
- **Secondary lymphedema** is caused by surgery, radiation therapy, injury, or infection that damages or removes lymph nodes. It may occur immediately after surgery or several years later. Most often, it arises after surgery or radiation to treat breast cancer, prostate cancer, pelvic area cancers, lymphoma, or melanoma.

Symptoms of Lymphedema

If you develop any of the following symptoms, call your physician to determine what is causing the swelling. He or she will confirm whether it is or is not lymphedema.

- Persistent swelling in an arm or leg
 - A feeling of fullness or heaviness in the arm or leg
 - Feeling of skin tightness in the area
 - Swelling in your hand or foot
 - Pain or numbness
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Treatment

Lymphedema is a permanent condition that tends to develop slowly. At this time there is no cure for lymphedema. However, there are effective treatments, and with some effort and dedication, this condition can be managed so that you can live your life comfortably.


Your physician may prescribe medication that will help to reduce fluid build-up.

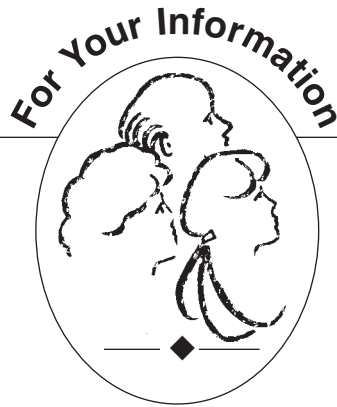
If the condition persists, your physician can refer you to Ahlbin Rehabilitation Centers' Lymphedema Therapy Program, where you can learn to reduce and contain your lymphedema very effectively. The treatment, called Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT), consists of four basic steps:

1. **Manual Lymph Drainage (MLD).** This is a gentle manual massage technique specifically aimed at improving the activity of the lymph vessels.
2. **Compression Therapy.** This is achieved by wearing elastic bandage materials and/or compression garments that apply constant pressure. Compression therapy, used between treatments, helps prevent the re-accumulation of lymph fluid.
3. **Exercises.** Special exercises, performed while you wear the compression bandages or garments, will improve drainage.
4. **Skin Care.** Because infection is a very common and serious complication of lymphedema, meticulous care of your skin and nails is crucial to the management of lymphedema.

Preventing Lymphedema

There are many things you can do to reduce your risk of developing lymphedema, to delay its onset or progression, and to prevent complications. The key is to avoid infection, injury, or burns.

- Wear gloves while doing housework or gardening.
 - Avoid sunburn.
 - Elevate the affected arm or leg whenever possible.
 - Avoid extreme temperature changes when bathing, washing dishes, or sunbathing, and do not use saunas.
 - Avoid smoking and alcoholic beverages.
 - Use an electric razor when shaving your legs or under your arms.
 - Avoid cutting the cuticles when manicuring your hands or pedicuring your feet.
 - Do not wear tight jewelry/elastic bands around the affected fingers, arms or legs.
 - Never allow an injection, IV, blood drawing, or blood pressure checks in the affected arm or leg.
 - Maintain good hygiene by keeping your skin clean and dry.
 - See a podiatrist once a year to check for and treat fungi, ingrown toenails, and calluses.
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- Maintain your ideal weight with a well-balanced, low-sodium, high-fiber diet. Choose protein that is easily digestible (e.g. chicken, fish, tofu). Eating too little protein will weaken the connective tissue and worsen the condition.
- Avoid heavy lifting with the affected arm.
- Avoid vigorous, repetitive movement against resistance with the affected arm/leg—and be sure to **EXERCISE CAREFULLY**.
- **VERY IMPORTANT:** Do not ignore even the slightest increase of swelling in your arm, hand, fingers, neck, chest wall, breast, toes, foot, ankle, leg, abdomen, or genitals. Do not ignore a rash, blistering, redness, increase of temperature, or fever. **SEE YOUR DOCTOR IMMEDIATELY.** An inflammation or infection in the affected limb may signal a worsening of lymphedema and can be serious.
- When flying or traveling long distances, wearing a compression garment can help avoid the excess swelling associated with periods of prolonged inactivity.

About Ahlbin Rehabilitation Centers' Lymphedema Program

The Ahlbin Rehabilitation Centers Lymphedema Program is staffed by physical therapists certified in lymphedema treatment.

Treatments are available in two convenient Ahlbin Centers satellite locations:

- **4 Corporate Drive, Shelton CT**
- **3585 Main St., Stratford CT**

For more information, or for an appointment, please call **(203) 380-4672**.