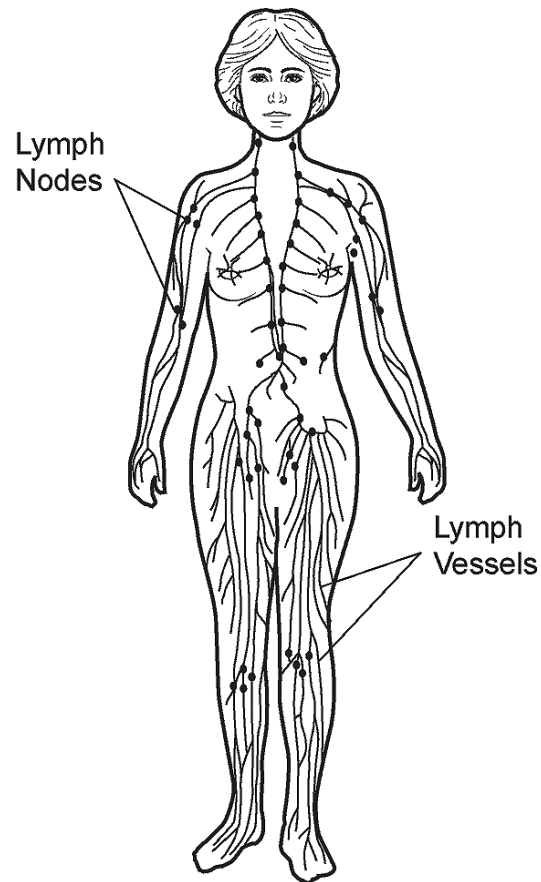


Compression Therapy for Lymphedema

Your lymphatic (lymph) system is an important part of your body's immune system. Your lymphatic system is made up of lymph vessels, lymph nodes and lymphatic tissue. If any part of the lymphatic system is damaged, or missing, lymphatic fluid can start to collect in tissues and cause swelling. Lymphedema is a buildup of clear lymphatic fluid under your skin that causes swelling. The location and amount of swelling is different for each person. Swelling is most often seen in one, or both of your arms or legs. This swelling can also be found in the breast, head, neck or genitals.



Lymphedema can happen to both men and women. It is a lifelong condition that does not have a known cure at this time. Symptoms of lymphedema are different for each person. Symptoms most often show up within the first 2 to 3 years after treatment, but your risk is lifelong. If lymphedema is found early, it can be easier to manage and may be reversed with treatment.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

How is lymphedema treated with compression therapy?

Reduction kits and compression wraps can be used to help to prevent or improve your lymphedema. Compression therapy keeps fluid from building up in your tissues and helps to move fluid out of the area. Compression garments may also be used to help reduce the amount of fluid that collects in an area. Compression will not cure your lymphedema, but it can make it easier to manage and slow the progression of this problem.

What do I need to know about compression therapy?

One of the goals of compression therapy is to make your limb (arm or leg) as small as possible. A certified lymphedema therapist will show you how to use reduction kits or multi-layer, short-stretch compression bandaging to wrap your limb(s). You may need to adjust your reduction kit or compression wraps during the day if it starts to slip or begins to feel loose. Changes in limb size can happen as your swelling goes down.

Once your limb is as small as possible, and the fluid has moved out of the area, your therapist may measure you for a compression garment. A compression garment is used to put pressure on your limb to control swelling and keep fluid from returning to the area. This garment will help keep your limb at its smallest size. It is important to wear your compression garment as often as directed by your doctor or therapist.

What can happen if I do not use compression therapy?

Without compression therapy, lymphatic fluid can begin to collect under your skin. Over time, this fluid can cause problems with your skin, such as cracking, hardening or changes in texture. Your skin may also leak clear lymphatic fluid. Fluid buildup and skin breakdown can increase your risk of infection, including cellulitis.

If fluid continues to collect under your skin, the fat cells around it may start to grow. This can cause your limb to change shape and get bigger. If this happens, compression can only be used to help reduce the amount of swelling. Compression will not shrink your fat cells or change your fat cells back to the size they once were. It is important to use compression therapy as soon as this problem starts to prevent it from getting worse.

**For more information on Cancer-Related Lymphedema,
we encourage you to visit our video library at
<http://cancer.osu.edu/patientedvideos>.**