Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD) - Upper Extremity (Arm) Home Program

Here are instructions on how to do manual lymphatic drainage to help remove swelling from your upper extremity (arm).

Things to know about MLD

- Use only gentle pressure, just enough to see your skin move.
- Move the skin in half circles ("rainbow" shape strokes) then let the skin return to the starting position.
- MLD should not be painful.
- Do not rub your skin red.
- Perform MLD each day.
- MLD should take about 15 to 30 minutes.
- Repeat each of the following MLD steps 5 to 10 times.

How to do MLD of your upper extremity

It is important to only do MLD if you have been told to do so by your physical therapist. Your physical therapist will teach you how to do this at home.

1. Abdominal (belly) breathing: Breathe in (inhale) so your belly expands and rises. Breathe out (exhale) to deflate your belly and draw your belly button in towards your spine. Exhale all of the way.

2. Use 3 fingers to gently stretch the skin over the lymph nodes in the hollow just above the collar bone, where your neck and shoulders meet. Stretch the skin in a semi-circle, moving towards your neck. Do this on both sides.

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

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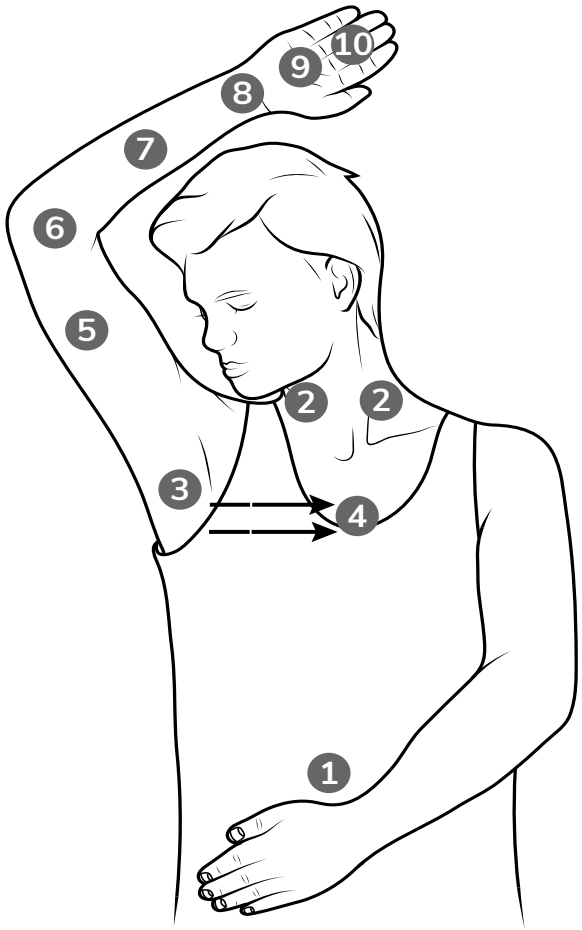
3. Pump the lymph nodes on the affected side of your armpit. If you are directed by your therapist, pump the other side too. To pump the lymph nodes, use the flat surface of your fingers to gently press into your armpit and move the tissue in a circular direction.



4. Use the flat surface of your hand to rub across the front of your chest. Start from your armpit on the involved side and move to the middle of your chest. If directed, continue to rub across to your uninvolved armpit.

5. Use the flat surface of your hand to rub your upper arm, moving up from your elbow to your shoulder. Rub up the front, back and outside of your arm towards the same side armpit and collar bone area.

6. Use your hand to rub circles at the bend of your elbow on the front and the back of your elbow.

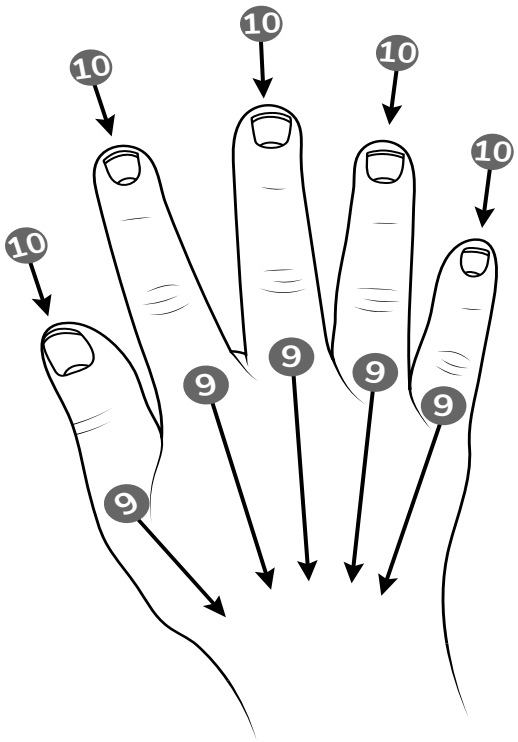
7. Use the flat surface of your hand to rub your forearm from the top of your wrist to your elbow. Then rub your forearm from the underside of your wrist to your elbow.

8. Use your hand to rub half circles around all sides of your wrist.

9. Use your fingers to rub each knuckle up to your wrist, then your palm from the center to the outside of your hand.

10. “Milk” each finger, including your thumb. Start at your nail bed and gently rub toward your hand.

11. Take 2 abdominal (belly) breathes to end the manual lymphatic drainage (MLD).

12. Put a low pH lotion (pH level 4 to 6 such as Eucerin) on your arm.

13. Put on any compression sleeve, wrap or bandaging.