

# Lymphoedema and Physiotherapy



By Kath Callinan-Moore

**E Book: Lymphoedema and Physiotherapy**  
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## Chapter 1:

### What is Lymphoedema?

The lymphatic system is part of the body's circulation system. Lymph is a near-colourless fluid which forms in the tissues of the body and drains through a network of fine vessels and lymph nodes before being returned to the bloodstream in the trunk. Every day this system pumps 2-4 litres of this excess fluid back into the bloodstream.

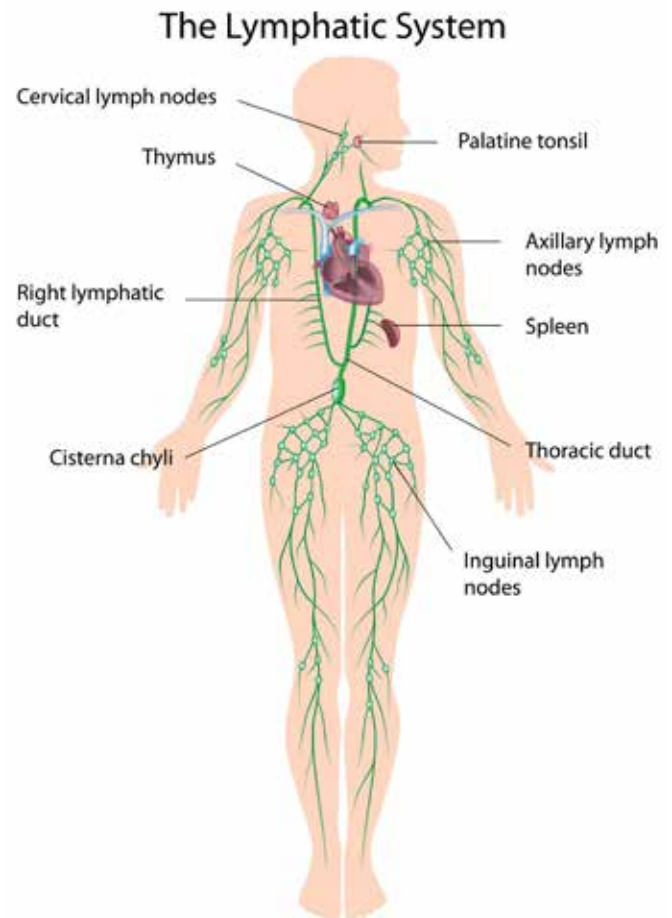
The lymph nodes filter out and destroy harmful bacteria and hence act as an infection control mechanism. These nodes are all through the body but form clusters at strategic points such as the neck, chest, abdomen, armpit and groin.

If lymph nodes are removed or radiated as part of cancer treatment, the "plumbing" is changed and the capacity and efficiency of the system can be affected. While the network overall will compensate and try to re-route the fluid via other pathways, there will be a higher risk of developing swelling in the region. This swelling is called lymphoedema.

Lymphoedema can occur in the arm, leg, breast, head, trunk and genitals.

It isn't necessarily related to how many nodes are removed or how many years pass since surgery or radiotherapy.

Lymphoedema is not the normal swelling that follows after surgery or radiotherapy.



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## Chapter 2:

### What Causes Lymphoedema

Problems with the lymphatic system can be present at birth or in the early decades of life. In practice, it is more common for lymphoedema to occur after treatment for cancer.

Infections such as cellulitis, deep vein thrombosis (DVT's) and traumatic injuries can overload the lymphatic system and result in lymphoedema in a compromised system.

It is estimated that 250, 000 Australians have lymphoedema. Approximately 85% of those with the condition are women.

### Signs and Symptoms:

#### Early signs and symptoms include:

- Feelings of fullness, tightness, heaviness or discomfort in the area or limb
- Swelling of the area, which may go down overnight. There may be noticeable tightness with jewellery, watch or clothing.
- Aching, tension or pain in the limb or area.

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## Chapter 3: Physiotherapy and Lymphoedema

### What can I expect from my physiotherapy sessions?

#### Assessment:

At Fitwise you will see one of our experienced [Physiotherapists](#). The initial session will include:

- A full history of your particular problem
- Assessment of the skin condition of the affected area
- Assessment of the particular features of the swelling
- Measurements of the area, including circular interval measurements for a limb. Keeping such a record helps to track changes in the progression or improvement of the swelling.

Your physiotherapist can help you to prevent the development of lymphoedema or assist in managing your lymphoedema. There is no cure for lymphoedema, but with assistance from your physiotherapist you can learn to manage your symptoms.

### How can I reduce my risk of developing Lymphoedema?

#### Education

Your physiotherapist will provide Education to assist in your understanding of your condition.

Ways you can reduce your risk of developing Lymphoedema:

1. Maintain good skin condition:
  - Visual checks and moisturising daily to keep the skin supple
  - Application of sunscreen and clothing to protect from sunburn
  - Insect repellent to protect from bites
  - Gloves for gardening and washing up
  - Antiseptic to any breaks, cuts or abrasions
  - Use of soap-free products in shower to prevent drying out the skin

2. Keep active:

Your physiotherapist will prescribe an exercise program to develop and maintain fitness using regular moderate intensity exercise. At Fitwise we are experienced in exercise prescription and can tailor the program for your individual needs, even if you've never exercised before. Using your muscles helps to pump lymph around the body and reduce overall swelling. Your exercise program may include cardiovascular fitness, resistance or weight training, core exercises, and flexibility.

3. Maintain a healthy weight:

Being overweight places an additional load on the lymphatic system. Attention to diet and regular exercise will assist with keeping within a healthy weight range.

4. Avoid hot baths and saunas

5. Avoiding injections, drips or blood pressure monitoring on an affected arm

6. Use of a compression garment, limb elevation and regular movement when flying. Your lymphoedema therapist can measure for, prescribe and fit these garments.



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## Chapter 4:

### Potential treatment

If you have developed symptoms of lymphoedema, your physiotherapist will work with you to manage the condition and assist in preventing progression.

#### Management can include:

##### 1. Education

to assist in your understanding of your condition. Your physiotherapist will provide detailed information during your treatment sessions.

##### 2. Lymphatic drainage

which involves deep breathing, gentle exercises and special lymphatic drainage massage. A simpler form of this massage can be taught for effective use at home.



##### 3. Provision of Compression garments.

These are used to reduce swelling and maintain the shape of a limb or body area.

Sometimes compression bandaging is used first to reduce the size of a swollen limb prior to fitting a garment.

Following a number of sessions with a therapist, the long-term aim is to have you self-manage your condition effectively and with confidence.



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## Chapter 5:

### Who can help?

1. **You:** you are the person who can be alert to the risk factors and early warning signs for lymphoedema. Together with advice and management from your physiotherapist you can reduce your risk of developing lymphedema or slow its progression.
2. **Oncologist/oncology nurse/GP:** Health care providers can refer you to a Physiotherapist experienced in managing patients with lymphoedema following cancer treatment.
3. **Lymphoedema Physiotherapist:** A referral is not needed to see a physiotherapist. You should book into a physiotherapist experienced in managing lymphoedema. Your treatment may involve massage, exercises, specific advice and the provision of support garments.
4. **Family members and friends:** Your family and friends can be invaluable supports. They can help motivate you to exercise and remind you to take care of your affected limb.

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## **Chapter 6:**

### **Frequently asked Questions and Further information:**

#### **1. What can a physiotherapist do for me if I have Lymphoedema?**

Take a detailed history and undertake a thorough assessment of the area involved. Then provide lymphatic drainage massage and teach a version of this for use at home. Provide additional information for preventing or managing this condition assist with the provision of compression garments when needed.

#### **2. What sort of exercise can I do?**

General moderate intensity exercise and preferably with components of aerobic, strength, flexibility and core training.

#### **3. Do I need to wear my garment when I exercise?**

Yes. Generally speaking this is preferable, especially for established lymphoedema, as it reduces the tendency to pool fluid in the limb/ area involved.

### **Further Information:**

#### **Australasian Lymphology Association:**

[www.lymphoedema.org.au](http://www.lymphoedema.org.au)

#### **Lymphoedema Association of Victoria:**

[www.lav.org.au](http://www.lav.org.au)

#### **National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre:**

[www.nbocc.org.au](http://www.nbocc.org.au)

#### **BreaCan- Gynaecological and Breast Cancer Support:**

[www.breacan.org.au](http://www.breacan.org.au)

