



Understanding Lymphedema: What It Is, What Causes It, and How It Can Be Managed

Swelling that doesn't go away isn't something you should simply learn to live with. Understanding lymphedema is the first step toward finding relief.

Many people assume persistent swelling is just part of getting older or the result of standing too long. While occasional swelling is common, swelling that continues or worsens over time may be a sign of lymphedema—a chronic condition that affects millions of people.

The good news? With the right treatment plan, many people living with lymphedema are able to reduce swelling, improve mobility, and enjoy a better quality of life.

What Is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema occurs when the lymphatic system is unable to move fluid through the body effectively. As fluid builds up, swelling develops—most commonly in the arms or legs.

Your lymphatic system is an important part of your immune system. It helps remove excess fluid, waste products, and toxins from your tissues. When that system is damaged or doesn't function properly, fluid can become trapped, leading to chronic swelling.

Lymphedema isn't simply "water retention." It's a medical condition that requires proper evaluation and management.

What Causes Lymphedema?

There are two primary types of lymphedema.

Primary Lymphedema

Primary lymphedema is caused by an abnormal development of the lymphatic system. Some people are born with it, while others may not develop symptoms until later in life.

Although it's less common, primary lymphedema can affect people of all ages.

Secondary Lymphedema

Secondary lymphedema is far more common and develops after the lymphatic system has been damaged.

Common causes include:

- Cancer surgery involving lymph node removal
- Radiation therapy
- Chronic venous disease
- Trauma or injury
- Infection
- Obesity
- Certain surgical procedures

Not everyone who experiences these conditions will develop lymphedema, but they do increase the risk.

What Are the Signs and Symptoms?

Lymphedema often develops gradually.

You may notice:

- Swelling in an arm, leg, hand, or foot
- A feeling of heaviness or tightness
- Clothing, shoes, or jewelry fitting more tightly
- Reduced flexibility or range of motion
- Skin that feels firm or thickened
- Frequent skin infections
- Discomfort or aching

Many people notice the swelling comes and goes in the beginning before becoming more persistent over time.

Why Early Treatment Matters

One of the biggest misconceptions about lymphedema is that it's simply a cosmetic issue.

In reality, untreated lymphedema can lead to:

- Progressive swelling
- Skin changes
- Reduced mobility
- Difficulty performing daily activities
- Increased risk of infection, including cellulitis
- Delayed wound healing

The earlier treatment begins, the easier it often is to control symptoms and protect long-term health.

How Is Lymphedema Treated?

While there isn't currently a cure for lymphedema, there are many effective treatments that can help manage the condition.

Your care plan may include one or more of the following:

Compression Therapy

Compression garments or wraps help encourage fluid movement and reduce swelling.

Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD)

This specialized, gentle massage technique helps stimulate lymphatic flow and redirect fluid to healthy pathways.

Exercise

Movement helps activate the muscles that naturally assist the lymphatic system.

Your provider may recommend specific exercises that are safe for your condition.

Skin Care

Healthy skin is an important part of lymphedema management.

Keeping your skin clean, moisturized, and protected can help reduce the risk of infection.

Lifestyle Modifications

Small changes such as maintaining a healthy weight, elevating the affected limb when appropriate, and avoiding prolonged periods of inactivity can all support long-term symptom management.

Can Lymphedema Be Prevented?

Not every case can be prevented, but there are ways to reduce your risk—especially if you've had cancer treatment or other procedures involving your lymphatic system.

Talk with your healthcare provider about ways to protect your lymphatic health if you're at increased risk.

Simple habits such as maintaining a healthy weight, staying active, protecting your skin from injury, and reporting swelling early can make a meaningful difference.

Living Well with Lymphedema

Although lymphedema is considered a chronic condition, it doesn't have to define your life.

Many people successfully manage their symptoms by:

- Wearing compression as recommended
- Staying physically active
- Caring for their skin every day
- Following their treatment plan
- Attending regular follow-up appointments
- Recognizing changes early

Managing lymphedema is about consistency, not perfection. Small daily habits can have a lasting impact on comfort, mobility, and overall quality of life.

When Should You See a Specialist?

If you've noticed persistent swelling that doesn't improve with rest or elevation, it's important to seek an evaluation.

You should also consider seeing a specialist if:

- One arm or leg is consistently larger than the other
- Swelling is becoming more frequent
- Your skin feels tight or thick
- You have recurring skin infections

- Your swelling is affecting your daily activities

Early evaluation can help identify the cause of your symptoms and create a personalized treatment plan before the condition progresses.

You Don't Have to Manage It Alone

At Aetherus Wound & Lymphatics, we understand that living with lymphedema can be physically and emotionally challenging. Our team provides comprehensive evaluations and personalized treatment plans designed to reduce swelling, improve function, and support your long-term health.

Whether you've recently noticed swelling or have been living with lymphedema for years, we're here to help you take the next step toward better management and improved quality of life.

If you have questions about persistent swelling or lymphedema, contact Aetherus Wound & Lymphatics to schedule an evaluation. Together, we can develop a plan that helps you move more comfortably and live more confidently.