

Reducing the Risk of Lymphedema

Risk reduction, treatment and self care

Who are we?

The Lymphedema Association of Quebec (LAQ), a non-profit association, was established in 1999. Our mission is to raise awareness about lymphedema, its causes, risk reduction strategies and treatments. The association is comprised of individuals directly affected by lymphedema, as well as their families, friends and health care professionals.



Association québécoise du lymphœdème
Lymphedema Association of Quebec

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is a swelling due to abnormal buildup of fluid in body tissues. It can develop when the lymphatic system is improperly developed or damaged through trauma or injury. Often becoming a chronic condition, it occurs most frequently in the limbs but can affect other parts of the body.

How does the lymphatic system work?

The lymphatic system plays an important role in the immune system and helps maintain the balance of fluids in the body. Lymph nodes filter out harmful cells for removal by the body's defense system.

Lymph vessels, like a waste drainage system, carry lymph, composed of extra fluid, protein and cellular products from body tissues back towards the heart. Lymph flow is aided by contraction of lymph vessels, muscle movement during exercise, and deep breathing.

What causes lymphedema?

There are two main types of lymphedema: primary and secondary. Primary lymphedema, due to a malformation of the lymphatic system, either appears at birth or later in life. Secondary lymphedema occurs when the lymphatic system is damaged as a result of trauma, surgery, or radiation. It can be a side effect of cancer-related surgeries that require the removal of lymph nodes, including surgery for such cancers as: breast, skin (melanoma), reproductive system (ovaries, uterus, prostate, testicles), head and neck, bladder and colon. Lymphedema may occur months or years after treatment.

What are the early warning signs of lymphedema?

- Swelling that occurs gradually or suddenly
- Feeling of heaviness and/or limited flexibility
- Tightness, hardness, or indenting of the skin when pressed
- Achiness, or bursting or shooting pain
- More swelling on hot, humid days or after exertion
- Infection (cellulitis) in the affected area
- Tightness of clothing or jewelry.

Do not ignore symptoms. Consult your doctor. Early treatment helps contain swelling and prevent complications.

Complications of lymphedema if left untreated

Infection, called cellulitis, is the greatest danger and requires antibiotic treatment.

Signs of cellulitis include:

- Red blotch or rash that may be itchy
- Increased swelling
- Increased temperature of the skin
- Sudden onset of high fever and chills.

Risk reduction recommendations

Exercise and deep breathing

Exercise is important for all round good health. Different types of exercise help build strength, maintain joint mobility, promote healthy body weight, increase fitness and prevent injury. Exercise also helps increase lymphatic flow and promote alternate lymphatic pathways.

- Swimming and water exercises, walking, gentle cycling, dance, yoga, tai chi, qigong and light aerobics are all beneficial activities.
- For those starting any new physical activity, proceed slowly, at your own pace.
- Strength training exercises can build or regain strength, increase stamina, build muscle tone and muscle power. For people already involved in an exercise program (e.g. weight lifting and vigorous activities), you may return progressively to your exercise program as determined by your physician and/or therapist.
- For people not physically active, you may undertake a progressive exercise program that includes strengthening or weight lifting with the approval of your physician and/or therapist, usually 3 months after the end of cancer treatment. All gentle exercises, especially aerobic, are recommended during and after cancer treatments.
- Resistance exercises should progress gradually with low weights, and low repetitions under the guidance of a professional instructor.

- Even though studies have shown the benefits of exercise, everyone is different. Listen to your body and rest when necessary. Measure your limb once a month or before starting any new exercise activity.
- Be active. A small number of exercise and educational programs for reducing the risk of developing lymphedema have been studied and show that exercises and active lifestyle are beneficial. For proper guidance please consult a certified lymphedema therapist.

Body weight

Studies have shown that being overweight is a risk factor for developing lymphedema. Try to maintain an average body weight.

Skin care

- Careful attention to your skin is essential to reduce the risk of infection. Cleanse carefully with mild soap. Dry thoroughly and moisturize.
- Be vigilant about cuts, scratches, splinters and pinpricks. Use electric razors to avoid nicks and skin irritation.
- If a cut or scratch does occur, clean the wound with soap, apply disinfectant, and, if indicated, an antibiotic ointment. Watch for signs of infection. If they appear, consult a doctor immediately.
- Protect your hands and nails. If you see a manicurist, inform this individual that you are at risk for lymphedema and seek assurance that equipment is properly sanitized. Do not cut cuticles. Consider wearing rubber gloves for household chores, gardening gloves for heavier tasks.
- Protect your feet and toenails and practice good foot hygiene. If you see a pedicurist, inform this individual that you are at risk for lymphedema and seek assurance that equipment is properly sanitized. Avoid walking barefoot, and wear closed, well-fitting shoes and comfortable hosiery.

Protect your skin with

- High protection sunscreen to avoid sunburn
- Insect repellent to avoid bites
- Non-allergenic moisturizer to prevent chapping and chafing

Other recommendations

- If possible avoid needle sticks, injections, blood tests and vaccination on the affected side.
- Whenever possible, infusion lines and portacath should be on the non-affected side.
- Wear comfortable socks, stockings and undergarments without tight elastic bands and remove jewelry and watches if they are too tight.
- Wear a well-fitted bra with soft shoulder straps and evenly-distributed support.
- Avoid prolonged exposure to high heat such as hot tubs and saunas
- Consider wearing a "Lymphedema Alert" bracelet.

Treatments for Lymphedema

If signs or symptoms of lymphedema occur, contact your physician. Treatments focus on compression and improving the drainage of the lymphatic system to reduce and control the swelling. Studies have shown that early intervention with compression garments reduced symptoms over time.

Combined decongestive therapy (CDT)

Combined decongestive therapy (CDT) combines skin care, manual lymph drainage (MLD), compression bandaging, and remedial exercises. CDT is presently considered the most effective treatment available.

Skin care

Meticulous skin care is crucial to maintain skin integrity and prevent infection.

Manual lymph drainage (MLD)

Manual lymph drainage (MLD) is a specific, gentle massage. MLD stimulates lymph flow and redirects the lymph fluid to areas of the body where the lymphatic system is functioning.

Compression bandaging

Compression bandaging (wrapping) is the application of layers of gauze, foam, and low-stretch bandages to replace skin pressure lost from lymphedema, to aid muscles in stimulating lymph flow and to prevent re-accumulation of swelling.

Compression garments

Compression garments keep swelling controlled by providing support and are an essential part of treatment.

Lymphedema Research and Resources

Lymphedema is an under-treated condition that is not recognized as a serious health problem. Physicians may fail to diagnose lymphedema. With improved clinical research, lymphedema and its treatments may enjoy better recognition from medical practitioners and higher funding priority from our governments.

Lymphedema Association of Quebec

The objectives of the Lymphedema Association of Quebec are to provide education, awareness, and support to those at risk and those with lymphedema, and to encourage research leading to effective treatments and eventually a cure. A small group of volunteers ensure that the LAQ continues to reach its objectives; however, the slope is steep, the challenges numerous. Your generosity through donations and offers of assistance is needed and greatly appreciated.



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LAQ Membership Application & Donation Form

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Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

Postal Code: _____

Phone (daytime): _____

Phone (evening): _____

E-mail: _____

Become a Member!

I would like to become a member for an annual fee of:

- \$35.00 for friends of the LAQ
- \$40.00 for active members
- \$185.00 for therapist members
- \$500.00 for corporate members

Make a Donation!

- I would like to donate \$10
- I would like to donate \$25
- I would like to donate \$50
- I would like to donate \$100
- I would like to donate \$_____

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Thank you for your support!

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