

LYMPHOEDEMA

FAQ

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema (also spelled "lymphedema") is a chronic condition that occurs when the lymphatic system is unable to properly drain lymphatic fluid from tissues, leading to swelling, heaviness within the affected limb and discomfort. Lymphoedema can have a significant impact on a person's quality of life, causing discomfort, pain, and limited mobility. It can also increase the risk of infections and other complications.

The lymphatic system is a network of vessels and lymph nodes that help remove excess fluid and waste products from the body. It works alongside the circulatory system.

When the lymphatic system is damaged or not functioning properly, lymphatic fluid can build up in the tissues. Lymphoedema most commonly affects the arms or legs, but it can occur in other parts of the body as well.

Lymphoedema can be classified as either primary or secondary lymphoedema. Primary lymphoedema is caused by an inherited genetic mutation that affects the development or function of the lymphatic system. Secondary lymphoedema, is lymphoedema which is caused by damage to the lymphatic system.

Although there is no known cure for lymphoedema, it can be managed with various treatment approaches, such as manual lymphatic drainage, compression therapy, exercise, and skin care. With proper care and treatment, many people with lymphoedema can manage their symptoms and maintain an active and healthy lifestyle.

How is lymphoedema diagnosed?

Lymphoedema is typically diagnosed through a physical examination by a healthcare provider who has experience in diagnosing and treating lymphatic disorders. The provider will ask about medical history, swelling profiles and symptoms.

During the physical examination, the therapist will assess the affected area for signs of swelling, skin changes, and other abnormalities. They may also use diagnostic imaging tests, such as ultrasound or lymphoscintigraphy, to assess the lymphatic system and determine the extent of the lymphoedema.

The lymphoedema therapist will also perform measurements to assess the size and shape of the affected limb and monitor changes in the condition over time.

It is important for individuals who suspect they may have lymphoedema to seek evaluation from a healthcare provider with experience in diagnosing and treating lymphatic disorders. Early diagnosis and treatment can help prevent the progression of the condition and improve outcomes.

What causes lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is caused by a disruption or dysfunction of the lymphatic system, which is responsible for draining lymphatic fluid from tissues and returning it to the bloodstream. This disruption can occur for a variety of reasons, including:

1. **Primary lymphoedema:** Inherited genetic mutation that affects the development of the lymphatic system. It is often present at birth or appears during puberty or later in life.
2. **Secondary lymphoedema:** Damage to the lymphatic system, which can occur because of surgery, radiation therapy, infection, injury, or other medical conditions such as cancer, venous insufficiency, or obesity.
3. **Filariasis:** A parasitic infection caused by a mosquito-borne worm can also lead to lymphoedema.
4. **Idiopathic lymphoedema:** In some cases, the cause of lymphoedema may not be known, and this is referred to as idiopathic lymphoedema.

Regardless of the cause, lymphoedema is characterised by a build-up of lymphatic fluid in the affected tissues, leading to swelling and discomfort.

Can lymphoedema be cured?

No. While there is no known cure for lymphoedema, the condition can be managed, and symptoms can be improved with various treatment approaches.

The primary goal of treatment is to reduce swelling and improve the function of the lymphatic system. This may involve a combination of therapies such as manual lymphatic drainage, compression therapy, exercise, and skin care. In some cases, surgery may be recommended to remove excess tissue or improve lymphatic flow.

It is important to note that lymphoedema requires ongoing management, and treatment may need to be adjusted over time as the condition progresses. With proper care and treatment, however, people with lymphoedema manage their condition and maintain an active and healthy lifestyle.

What are some treatment options for lymphoedema?

There are several treatment options for lymphoedema, including:

1. **Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD):** A type of massage therapy that stimulates the lymphatic system and reduces swelling. It involves gentle, rhythmic movements that are performed by a trained lymphoedema therapist.
2. **Compression garment therapy:** Bandages, stockings, wraps or sleeves to help reduce swelling and improve lymphatic flow.
3. **Exercise:** Gentle exercise such as walking, cycling, or swimming can help improve lymphatic flow. Specific exercises may also be given to improve lymphatic flow via the muscles.
4. **Healthy weight management:** Increased weight causes more lymphatic fluid to be pushed into the tissues beneath the skin making it harder for the lymphatic system to remove the fluid.
5. **Skin care:** Skin care is important for people with lymphoedema to prevent infections.
6. **Surgical options:** In some cases, surgery may be recommended to remove excess tissue or improve lymphatic flow.

The best treatment approach for lymphoedema depends on the individual case, and our lymphoedema therapists individualise a client's care. Early intervention is preferred, as it results in better outcomes and prevents complications because of the condition.

Lymphoedema and cancer

Lymphoedema is a common side effect of cancer treatment, particularly following surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy. These treatments damage the lymphatic system, leading to a build-up of lymphatic fluid in the affected area.

Cancer patients who are at risk of developing lymphoedema should be monitored closely and may benefit from preventive measures such as compression therapy and exercise. Those who develop lymphoedema can benefit from treatments such as manual lymphatic drainage, compression therapy, and skin care.

It is important for cancer patients to discuss the risk of lymphoedema with their healthcare team and to seek treatment as early as possible if symptoms occur.

What is the difference between lymphoedema and lipoma?

Lymphoedema and lipoma are two different conditions that can affect the body's soft tissues but are completely different in causes and characteristics.

Lymphoedema is a condition in which excess lymphatic fluid accumulates in the tissues, leading to swelling and discomfort. It can be caused by a variety of factors, including damage to the lymphatic system, infection, or certain medical conditions. Lymphoedema can occur in any part of the body but is most common in the arms or legs.

Lipoma, on the other hand, is a benign (noncancerous) tumour composed of fat cells. It is typically a slow-growing, soft, and painless lump that can occur anywhere on the body. Lipomas are often found just under the skin and can vary in size from a few millimetres to several centimetres in diameter. There is no need to remove a lipoma, other than for cosmetic purposes.

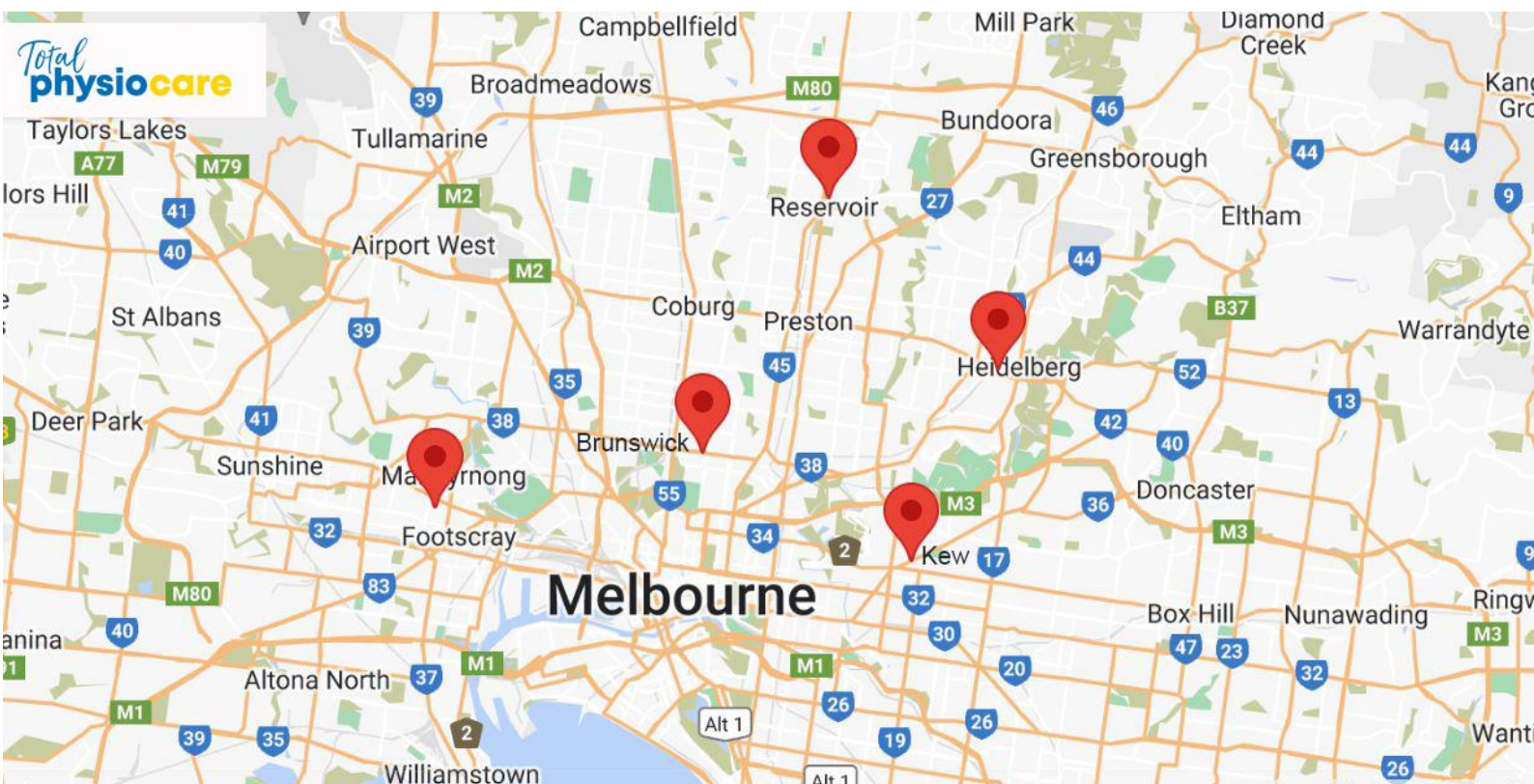
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