

More Than Just Swelling

Swollen ankles and swollen wrists are common concerns for many people. Sometimes, it is simply a part of the aging process. Other times, the swelling is a tell-tale sign of a more serious underlying condition such as poor circulation or congestive heart failure. There is yet another type of swelling that is often over-looked. This condition is called lymphedema. By taking the next few minutes to read this article, you may discover that you or someone you know potentially has this medical condition and not even be aware of it.

If asked, many folks will tell you they have heard of lymphedema, but have no clue what it is. Let me break it down for you. The word “edema” simply means swelling; in other words, the accumulation of excess fluid within the tissues of the body. By definition, “lymph” is the protein-rich fluid occupying the space in between cells and is our immune system’s primary line of defense against germs, bacteria and viruses.

When our body is functioning properly, the circulatory system carries oxygen, nutrients and proteins via the arteries out to the capillaries. Under the pressure from the heart, these vital components are pushed out into the space between the cells. The cells absorb what they need and expel the rest into surrounding lymph fluid. With no pressure, the lymph fluid is unable to force its way back into the blood stream. Therefore, the body has created the lymphatic system to help rid the body of this excess “waste” fluid. Throughout the body, there are millions of one-directional lymph ducts that gather the lymph and transport it to the lymph nodes. Along the way, the lymph fluid also collects any cellular debris, viruses or bacteria that have successfully penetrated the skin.



Once the lymph fluid arrives at the lymph nodes, the contents of the fluid are broken down, neutralized, and destroyed. The now-harmless fluid is emptied back into the blood stream where it is extracted by the kidneys.

Lymphedema arises when, for whatever reason, the lymph nodes (or surgical removal of nodes) are no longer able to filter the total volume of lymph the body is producing in their designated region. As a result, the excess lymph begins to accumulate under the skin; hence, the onset of the lymphedema swelling. Unfortunately, because of how the body is constructed, excess lymph from one region cannot flow into another region for filtration.

The result is the slow enlargement of the extremity (arm or leg) associated with that region. Rarely do the lymph nodes for both arms or both legs fail simultaneously. Therefore, ***the most common visual***

characteristic of lymphedema is one limb swelling larger than the other (see photo). Other symptoms include tightly stretched skin, fluid weeping through the skin, or skin that is slow to rise back up after being depressed.

If untreated, the accumulation of this “waste fluid” is the perfect breeding ground for all kinds of nasty germs, viruses, bacteria and infections.

The proper treatment for lymphedema is a special medical massage called Manual Lymphatic Drainage. In addition, the individual may be prescribed a pump or a compression garment to help control the accumulation of lymph in between sessions.

The certified lymphedema therapists at Restored Balance Integrated Health Services can certainly help bring lymphedema back under control. In addition, Restored Balance work's hand-in-hand with the *American Cancer Society* and *Cricket's Answer for Cancer* to help insure lymphedema sufferers get the help they need.

If you have questions or think you may possibly have lymphedema, call Restored Balance today at 717-495-2802).