

What is Lymphedema?

The lymphatic system is a network of vessels, organs and tissues that carry fluid throughout the body. When the lymphatic system is blocked or damaged the fluid cannot flow freely and builds-up in soft tissue causing swelling. This fluid build-up is called Lymphedema.

Lymphedema is often seen in limbs but can occur anywhere in the body.

What causes Lymphedema?

There are many different causes:

- Lymph node damage from surgery or radiation treatment
- Lymphatic system blockage from scar tissue or tumour
- Blockage of the lymphatic system by cancer cells

Signs and symptoms of Lymphedema

- Swelling of the legs or arms
- Arms or legs feeling heavy or full
- Tight feeling skin over your legs or arms
- Thickening of your skin, there may also be skin changes such as blisters.
- A feeling of tightness when wearing clothes or shoes
- Itching of your legs or toes
- A burning feeling over your legs or toes

Treatment of Lymphedema

Lymphedema cannot be cured but it can be controlled.

A Lymphedema therapist can assess your symptoms and develop a management plan with you. A management plan may include compression bandages, massage or exercise. Lymphedema treatment is not free – please speak to your GP or healthcare professional for more information.

To contact a Lymphedema therapist please contact the Cancer Society 0800 226 237 or visit www.cancernz.org.nz to find a therapist close to you.

There are also a few things you can do at home to reduce the symptoms of Lymphedema in your legs:

- Eat a well-balanced diet – low in fat and salt and high in fibre with plenty of water for hydration
- Regularly eat easily digestible protein, such as chicken and fish or tofu
- Regular exercise (such as walking or swimming) can help fluid movement throughout the body
- Maintain a healthy weight for your height (if you are unsure speak to your healthcare professional)
- Wear loose clothing to encourage fluid circulation around your body
- Keep skin clean and dry and regularly apply moisturiser
- Protect your skin with sunblock and insect repellent when outdoors
- Treat any cuts or grazes early with antiseptic cream
- Visit your GP early if you notice any signs of infection such as redness or swelling
- Look after your feet, cut toenails and dry between your toes after bathing or swimming
- When removing body hair it is best to use an electric razor or hair-removal cream to prevent any injury to your skin
- If you wear compression stockings make sure these are washed regularly as per the instructions
- When travelling keep active during your journey and wear your compression stockings

If you would like to visit a Lymphedema Support Group please call the Cancer Society 0800 226 237 or visit www.cancernz.org.nz for a list of groups in your area.