

Lymphoedema - the importance of self care

By practising self care, patients with lymphoedema and other chronic conditions can change their outlook and improve their quality of life, writes Karen Nash Greally

IN IRELAND it is estimated that lymphoedema affects up to 12,380 patients.¹ In 2018, 1,451 patients were admitted to hospital with cellulitis related to lymphoedema at an approximate cost of €13.6 million.² Based on international studies, this cost could be reduced to less than €1.8 million, a saving of 87%, if comprehensive lymphoedema services were introduced.³

The introduction of a specialist lymphoedema service aims to ensure that patients are diagnosed early and referred for treatment to limit disease progression and reduce the need for time-consuming, cost-intensive treatment. Although lymphoedema is not curable, it can be successfully managed with an emphasis on education about risk factors, prevention and lifestyle management alongside effective and consistent treatment. This approach will lead to improved outcomes for patients and a reduction in healthcare spending.⁴

There is also the potential to save money by introducing lymphoedema management into the treatment of leg ulcers with chronic oedema to PHN services, saving on time and on cost of wound dressings.⁵

Lymphoedema can be primary where it's congenital or secondary where it is due to injury, vascular or surgery, just to name a few. Lipoedema can also follow the same treatment regime with some additions. Some clients with complex medical conditions may not be suitable for intensive treatment but some elements of treatment still apply.

Signs and symptoms

- Feeling of heaviness, tightness or discomfort
- Shiny, tight skin over the area of swelling
- Clothing and jewellery feeling tighter than normal
- Reduced flexibility in the joints of the affected limb.

How is lymphoedema treated?

A full holistic assessment will be carried out by the therapist to include

lymphoedema history, whether it is primary or secondary, causes, signs and symptoms, surgical and cancer history as well as any other medical history .

A treatment plan will be agreed with the patient. There are four cornerstones in the treatment of lymphoedema:

- **Activity:** the therapist will encourage the to stay active and exercise. Any exercise is good, including as housework and gardening. In addition, specific exercises and simple lymphatic drainage specific to the swollen area may be added into your care plan
- **Skin care:** the patient will be advised on the best skin care regime to keep the skin clean and well moisturised. This can be easily added into the patient's morning and evening routine
- **Compression:** a suitable garment may be prescribed by the therapist. Bandaging/wraps may be required on the affected limb to reduce swelling. A joint approach and participation is encouraged to highlight that self-management is achievable
- **Manual lymphatic drainage:** the therapist may use this massage technique which enhances the function and drainage of the lymph system.

Education plays an important role for patients and healthcare professionals. There is now a new Lymphoedema module on HSElanD with more information about early detection and treatment of lymphoedema - [LINK here](#).

Lymphoedema, like many chronic conditions, although manageable, is for life. Maybe we should look on this as 'self care'? In today's world there is a significant emphasis on this term. When you practise self care you produce positive feelings, which boost motivation and self-esteem and leaves you with increased energy to support yourself.

Self care starts with looking after one's basic needs. It is about mental health and



A person with lymphoedema putting on compression stockings

also about caring for one's physical self. Self care and compassion can make all the difference, even on the most difficult days.

Self care should be simple and attainable. It's not just about the expensive spa days and shopping/hotel trips, it's the basic activities of daily living.

Lymphoedema self care includes skin care, exercise, wearing the prescribed compression garment and maybe intensive massage treatment.

It is known that exercise can increase happiness, confidence and energy while reducing anxiety and improving sleeping patterns. Having a skin care regime can make the patient feel happier, as it's about the ritual and putting time and energy into making yourself feel good. Additionally, the power of touch from others is known to boost relaxation and general comfort.

Compression garments are used to keep the swelling down and improve circulation. They also enable the patient to wear one's own clothes, thereby improving their ability to go about the day.

Changing patients' thoughts and attitudes can give them a fresh perspective on their condition. Perhaps we should change our language around 'chronic condition management' and instead use 'self care of my life long condition'.

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References