

Managing Lymphedema

This handout offers information on how to manage lymphedema. You were given this handout because you have lymphedema.

What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is swelling caused by extra fluid that builds up in your body's tissues. It usually affects an arm or leg. It can develop when the lymphatic system, which drains extra fluid from your body, is damaged or blocked. Lymphedema is usually a long-term condition. It can happen when cancer or cancer treatment permanently damages or changes the lymphatic system.

Why can lymphedema happen during cancer treatment?

For people living with cancer, lymphedema can develop for several reasons.

- Surgery: Lymph nodes may be removed to check for cancer or help prevent it from spreading. This can make it harder for lymph fluid to drain normally.
- Radiation therapy: Radiation can cause swelling and scar tissue, which may damage or block lymph vessels and lymph nodes.
- Cancer tumour growth: A tumour can press on or block lymph vessels or lymph nodes, preventing lymph fluid from draining properly.

What are the symptoms of lymphedema?

Lymphedema can be in part or all of your arm, leg, chest or other body part. You may have some or all of these symptoms in the body part with lymphedema.

- Swelling: Part or all of your arm, leg, chest, or other part of your body may become swollen.
- Heaviness or tightness: Feelings of heaviness, tightness, or fullness.
- Tight fitting clothing or jewelry: Your rings, watches, clothing, or shoes may feel tighter than normal.
- Stiffness or aching: You may have less movement, stiffness, discomfort, or aching.
- Changes in the skin: Your skin may become harder or thicker over time. This is called fibrosis.

How is lymphedema managed?

Lymphedema can often be managed with treatments that help reduce swelling and prevent complications.

- **Compression Therapy**: Special bandages, wraps, custom fitted sleeves, stockings, or other compression garments can help move lymph fluid away from the swollen area. Compression Therapy should be managed by a Registered Massage Therapist or Physiotherapist trained in lymphedema care.

- **Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD):** MLD is a gentle skin massage that helps lymph fluid move through your body. It can help move extra fluid away from swollen areas. MLD should be performed by a Registered Massage Therapist or Physiotherapist trained in lymphedema care.
- **Skin Care:** Keep the area of your body with lymphedema clean and moisturized, and protect it from cuts, scratches, burns, and other injuries. Injuries to your skin can increase your risk of infection and other complications.

What you can do to manage your lymphedema

1. Find a Registered Massage Therapist (RMT) or Physiotherapist (PT) who is certified in MLD. Go to lymphontario.ca/directory to find a therapist certified in MLD close to your home.
2. You may need several appointments with the MLD therapist. The therapist may also recommend compression bandaging. Compression bandaging uses special low-stretch bandages that are worn day and night to help reduce swelling. This is usually used early in treatment, when the size of the affected area may change quickly. The bandages can be adjusted as the swelling changes.
3. Your MLD therapist will talk with you about exercise and skin care. These are important parts of lymphedema treatment.
4. When your swelling is stable (size of swelling is not changing), you will be referred to a certified fitter to be measured for compression garments.
5. A certified fitter will talk with you about your needs and recommend the best garment for you. They will then measure you for the garment. Most lymphedema garments are custom made, so your garment will be ordered and made to fit your exact measurements.
6. The certified fitter will talk with you about the cost of your compression garments and what coverage may be available.
7. Your private insurance may help pay for your compression garments. You may also qualify for funding through the Ontario Assistive Devices Program (ADP).

The Ontario Assistive Devices Program

The Ontario Assistive Devices Program (ADP) may help pay for pressure modification devices, such as compression garments. If you are approved, ADP usually pays 75% of the approved cost. Some people who receive social assistance may qualify for 100% coverage.

To apply for ADP:

- You must have a valid Ontario Health Card and need the pressure modification device for at least 6 months.
- The application must be completed with the required health-care provider, an ADP-registered authorizer, and an ADP-registered vendor.

- The pressure modification device must be purchased from an authorized supplier.

Ask your MLD Therapist about the Compassion Fund available through Lymphedema Ontario. This fund offers financial assistance for patients who cannot afford the necessary treatments from a certified MLD therapist. For more information, go to lymphontario.ca/Compassion-Fund

How to Apply to ADP

1. Obtain the “Application for Funding Pressure Modification Devices” from an ADP registered authorizer (MLD therapist) or vendor (certified fitter). You can also print it from the ontario.ca/page/assistive-devices-program website.
2. Have your oncologist sign and date the form to confirm your diagnosis. Your family doctor or nurse practitioner cannot complete the initial form.
3. Have an ADP registered authorizer (trained MLD) sign the form.
4. Buy the pressure modification device from an ADP registered vendor. Go to ontario.ca/page/garments-pumps-and-braces#section-5 to search for an ADP registered vendor.

Local ADP registered vendors

Location	Vendor	Contact information
Oshawa	Durham Medical	242 King Street East, Oshawa, L1H 1C7 905-728-1112
Peterborough	Medical Centre Pharmacy	707 Charlotte Street, Peterborough, K9J 2X5 705-743-3484
	Wellwise by Shoppers Drug Mart	745 Landsdowne Street West, Peterborough, K9J 1Z2 705-743-5100
Scarborough	Wellwise by Shoppers Drug Mart	Cedarbrae Centre, 3495 Lawrence Ave E Unit 5, Scarborough, M1H 1B2 416-431-4621

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