

LYMPHEDEMA:

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is chronic swelling in a portion of the body (usually an arm or leg) due to accumulation of lymph fluid (protein and water) in the tissue spaces as a result of obstruction of venous and/or lymphatic vessels or lymph nodes.

Why should Lymphedema be treated?

The *lymphatic system* is part of the circulatory system along with veins and arteries. It collects fluid from tissues in all parts of the body, and returns the fluid to the blood centrally. It removes impurities (including bacteria and cancer cells) from the circulatory system and produces disease fighting cells (lymphocytes) for the immune system.

Lymphedema, if untreated, creates an environment of stagnant, protein-rich fluid causing lymph channels to increase in size and number. It reduces oxygen tension throughout the transport system, interferes with wound healing, and provides an environment for bacteria, increasing the potential for infection. If the condition of swelling and inflammation persists, the tissue eventually thickens and becomes fibrotic (hardens). This leads to decreased active motion which can intensify the problem.



What are the types and causes of Lymphedema?

There are two types of lymphedema—Primary and Secondary.

- ▶ *Primary Lymphedema* is caused by an abnormality of the lymphatic system that can be present at birth or occur later in life.
- ▶ *Secondary Lymphedema* is caused by infection, injury, surgery, radiation, or trauma. This type of lymphedema may be a side effect of breast cancer treatment that results in chronic and debilitating arm/hand swelling. It may occur after removal of lymph nodes.

Can Lymphedema be cured?

With early intervention and proper treatment, the condition can be controlled, allowing the individual to lead a full and normal life. However, this is frequently a persistent condition. Therefore, techniques for self-management and maintenance of swelling reduction and other side effects are essential factors in control.



What treatments are available?

Initially, a thorough evaluation is performed by a specially trained occupational or physical therapist to determine the proper course of treatment. All patients are actively involved in choosing the treatment options that best fit into their lifestyles.

Treatment options may include the following:

- ▶ *Manual lymph drainage* to drain the lymph fluid from the affected extremity utilizing the superficial lymph vessels with a non-invasive, manual therapy technique.
- ▶ *Compression bandaging of the extremity* to reduce the protein-rich fluid in the swollen tissues.
- ▶ *Comprehensive exercise program*, including flexibility and strengthening to enhance the lymph drainage.
- ▶ *Skin care program* to prevent infection.
- ▶ *Recommendation of a compression garment* and instruction with proper wear and care.
- ▶ *Education/Instruction*—a home program to control the swelling independently.

Who is a candidate for evaluation and treatment?

- ▶ Individuals whose surgery or cancer treatment included lymph node removal and/or radiation therapy.
- ▶ Individuals who have any swelling in the arm, hand, leg, foot, or chest that does not resolve.

Note: If there is a question regarding active cancer or infections, a physician's review will be required.

Where is this comprehensive treatment available?

The Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (IPMR), a not-for-profit corporation established in 1950, offers comprehensive treatment



provided by certified and licensed Occupational and Physical Therapists who have specialized training in the treatment of lymphedema.

For your convenience, IPMR treatment is available at several locations. You can choose to receive lymphedema services at our outpatient locations:

- ▶ Downtown Peoria
- ▶ Northern Peoria
- ▶ Pekin
- ▶ Morton

We can also provide lymphedema prevention and management services post-surgically at Proctor Hospital. All IPMR locations offer free and accessible parking.

How do I get help?

Anyone can contact IPMR at (309) 692-8670 for information, assistance, or to schedule an appointment. However, since the therapy we provide is medical, we require a physician referral to initiate treatment. The referral can be obtained through your physician or from our medical advisor. Our staff can assist you in this process. Also, IPMR is a member of most major health insurance networks.