

Lymphedema and chronic edema (swelling)

Lymphedema is a form of chronic edema caused by the buildup of lymph fluid when there is a blockage or damage to the lymphatic system. This results in swelling, commonly seen in the extremities, such as a leg or arm that can affect other parts of the body.

The lymph system plays an important role in the body's fluid balance and defense against illness and infection. If the tissue swelling is long-lasting, it damages the lymphatic system. This results in chronic edema and tissue changes such as fibrosis, risking recurrent infections known as [cellulitis](#).

There are several known causes of lymphedema and chronic edema, including congenital conditions, obesity, physical trauma and infections.

There are two types of lymphedema:

- Primary lymphedema occurs when someone is born with a malformation or genetic mutation in the lymphatic system. This causes swelling in a specific part of the body
- Secondary lymphedema is due to damage or injury to a previously functioning lymphatic system. Recent statistics indicate that up to 30% of post-breast cancer patients will develop lymphedema as a result of surgery to remove lymph nodes, chemotherapy and radiation treatment. It's important to diagnose and treat lymphedema early to provide a chance to reverse or minimize edema

Lymphedema resources

For more information, several HealthLink BC resources and services are available for individuals dealing with lymphedema:

- [Lymphedema](#)

- [Swelling symptom checker](#)
- [Lymphedema: Managing Lymphedema](#)
- [Blood and Lymph Related Topics](#)
- [Information and Resources on Cancer for Health Care Professionals](#)
- [Persons with Cancer](#)

The following resources are also available:

BC Cancer

[BC Cancer - Lymphedema](#) provides a comprehensive cancer-control program for people in B.C.

BC Cancer has general information on lymphedema and patient handouts for safely reducing and controlling lymphedema.

British Columbia Lymphedema Association (BCLA)

The [British Columbia Lymphedema Association](#) is an organization that supports people in B.C. with lymphedema through advocacy, awareness and knowledge about lymphedema and available management options. The BCLA provides online lymphedema information and resources such as books, videos, web links, compression garment information, support group lists and a registry of health care professionals.

Canadian Lymphedema Framework (CLF)

The [Canadian Lymphedema Framework](#) is an academic and patient stakeholder-collaboration organization that works to improve the management of lymphedema and related disorders in Canada. The CLF provides research, education and partnerships with other national and international frameworks.

Treatment options

The CLF recommends that the best treatment is decongestive lymphatic therapy from a certified lymphedema therapist. For more information, please visit [Getting treated \(Canadian Lymphedema Framework\)](#).

The British Columbia Lymphedema Association has additional information on treatment options, including exercise, “kinesiology taping”, dry brushing, skin care and surgery. For more information, please visit [Treatment Options \(British Columbia Lymphedema Association\)](#).

Therapists with training and experience in the management of lymphedema can help. These therapists have training in lymphedema care, often called Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD) or Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT). A list of therapists with this training, by BC Health Authority and location, can be found here:

- [Online Professional Listings \(British Columbia Lymphedema Association\)](#)
- [Find a Physio \(Physiotherapy Association of British Columbia\)](#) - Patients can filter by physiotherapists who specialize in lymphedema care

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.