

# 5 things every Healthcare Professional should know about Lymphoedema/Chronic Oedema

Lymphoedema is a chronic and persistent swelling which results from a failure of the lymphatic system. Consequences are swelling, skin and tissue changes and predisposition to infection. It can affect any area of the body, most commonly affecting the limbs. It can impact on a person's body image, self-esteem and cause not only physical, but emotional distress as well. Prevalence is 3.99 per 1,000 population.

*Moffatt CJ, Keeley V, Franks PJ, Rich A, Pinnington LL (2016) Chronic oedema: a prevalent health care problem for UK health services. International Wound Journal*



For more information see [www.thebls.com](http://www.thebls.com) info@thebls.com  @BritishLymph  The British Lymphology Society

Best Practice, Leadership, Support

**The list below is by no means a definitive description of lymphoedema and is to be used as a guide only.**

## 1. Causes

- Primary – Hereditary, Congenital
- Secondary – Many Cancers and their treatments, Venous disease, Immobility, Injury, Obesity, Infection, Filariasis

## 2. Risk Factors

- Lymph node removal: irradiation increases the risk
- Venepuncture or blood pressure on at risk or oedematous limb
- Wounds
- Infection – cellulitis & fungal infections

## 3. Recognising Lymphoedema

- Swelling that does not go down overnight or with elevation
- Dry skin
- Skin folds with thickening of skin and firmness
- Discomfort or heaviness reported

## 4. Treatment

**GP Specific interventions:**  
**Medication -**

- Diuretics only if patient has cardiac history
- Antibiotics as per Consensus Document for Cellulitis [www.thebls.com/documents/431.pdf](http://www.thebls.com/documents/431.pdf)
- Analgesia as required; need to identify cause of pain
- Emollients

**Referral to specialist clinic for supported self-management -**

- Skin care – daily inspection, washing and moisturising of skin
- Exercise and maintenance of mobility
- Compression garments/multi-layer lymphoedema bandaging
- Simple/Manual Lymphatic Drainage (SLD/MLD)

## 5. Complications

- Cellulitis
- Lymphorrhoea “wet leaky legs”
- Skin changes
- Skin folds
- Social/Psychological impact - lowered self-esteem, difficulties at work, finding clothes etc.



The Lymphoedema Support Network have two e-learning modules for GPs and HCPs about how to recognise lymphoedema, what should be done, when to refer to specialist services and how to support their patients to self-manage.

The modules can be accessed by healthcare professionals, medical trainees and health care professional students at:

<http://www.lymphoedema.org/index.php/information-for-health-care-professionals/bmj-learning-module>

<http://elearning.rcgp.org.uk/lymphoedema>