

## Who treats lymphedema?

Most lymphedema treatment is carried out by therapists who have completed specialized training. You need to have a referral from a physician for lymphedema treatment and a prescription to obtain a medical grade compression garment.

## Lymphedema information

**The National Lymphedema Network (NLN)** provides education and guidance on the prevention and management of lymphedema. The **Lymphology Association of North America (LANA)** has developed guidelines regarding the content and quantity of training for lymphedema treatment, and offers a national test.

*Listing with NLN or LANA is voluntary and the registries do not include all health care professionals qualified to treat lymphedema.*

## Lymphedema treatment with UCHealth

UCHealth offers treatment with LANA-certified therapists at UCHealth Outpatient Rehabilitation Services. A physician referral is required.

Call **970.495.8454** for more information or to make an appointment.

## Lymphedema resources

**American Cancer Society**  
ACS Denver: 303.758.2030  
[cancer.org](http://cancer.org)

**Circle of Hope Lymphedema Foundation, Inc.**  
203.758.6138  
[lymphedemacircleofhope.org](http://lymphedemacircleofhope.org)

**Lymphology Association of North America**  
773.756.8971  
[clt-lana.org](http://clt-lana.org)

**National Lymphedema Network**  
800.541.3259  
[lymphnet.org](http://lymphnet.org)

# Understanding Lymphedema



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**uhealth**  
[uhealth.org](http://uhealth.org)

## What does the lymphatic system do?

A healthy lymphatic system transports white blood cells, removes waste products, returns water and protein (which was filtered out of the blood vessel capillaries) to the circulatory system. When the lymphatic system is blocked or damaged, the ability to fight infection in that part of the body is reduced.

## What is lymphedema?

Lymphedema is swelling of a body part, most often an arm or leg, which occurs when the lymph system is not able to reabsorb and transport interstitial fluid (fluid found between the cells). Lymphedema occurs when lymphatic vessels are absent, poorly developed, obstructed or damaged.

## What causes lymphedema?

**Primary** lymphedema can be present from birth, or develops later in life, with no injury, because the lymphatic system is poorly developed or absent in some areas.

**Secondary** lymphedema is caused by damage to part of the lymphatic system. This can occur when lymph nodes are removed in surgery to treat cancer. Radiation therapy as part of cancer treatment can also damage lymph vessels. In the U.S., cancer treatment is the most common cause of secondary lymphedema.

Repeated infections or severe trauma (which could occur in a car accident) can also damage the lymphatic system enough to cause lymphedema. Lymphedema can develop over time as a result of chronic venous insufficiency (a condition where the leg veins are too slow in returning blood to the heart).

## What are the symptoms of lymphedema?

The first symptoms of lymphedema may be feelings of heaviness, tightness or aching in the affected limb. You may notice that clothing or jewelry fits tightly. The most obvious sign of lymphedema is swelling with “pitting” edema. With pitting edema, pressure on the skin will leave an indentation that does not immediately disappear.

You may develop symptoms of lymphedema a few months or years after an injury or cancer treatment. Pitting edema can be caused by several different medical problems, so it is important to see your doctor to make sure the correct diagnosis is made.



## What are the side effects associated with lymphedema?

Typical side effects with lymphedema are of heaviness, aching, swelling, and of recurrent infections in the affected area.

Untreated lymphedema tends to be progressive. When the lymph fluid remains trapped in the interstitial tissue for a long time, the skin can become thickened and the tissue becomes fibrous and hard.

## Can diuretic drugs help treat lymphedema?

No. Diuretic drugs that cause increased excretion of water from the body are not effective in treating lymphedema because this does not affect the transport of proteins. The proteins that are part of lymph fluid act like sponges and attract water, so the lymphedema persists until the protein molecules can be returned to the circulatory system.

## How is lymphedema treated?

Once present, lymphedema cannot be cured. But, like other chronic conditions such as diabetes, the symptoms can usually be well controlled by consistently following a good management program, such as Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT). CDT uses the following treatment components.

- **Compression** is typically part of the lymphedema management program. Compression may be achieved in the early stages of treatment, by use of low-stretch bandages for wrapping the affected limb. When the affected area is stable, most people obtain a compression garment (sleeve or stocking) for routine daily wear.
- **Manual Lymph Drainage (MLD)** is a special type of gentle massage that stimulates the lymphatic system to work more effectively. MLD can shift lymph fluid from areas with damaged lymph vessels to areas with functioning vessels. This is typically used in the early stages of treatment, to assist with reducing the size/volume of the affected area.
- **Exercise and excellent skin care** are important parts of effective lymphedema management, along with consistent use of compression.