

Lymphedema Association of Saskatchewan (LAS) Communication Fact Sheet

The Lymphedema Association of Saskatchewan (LAS) is a non-profit organization founded in 2004 for the betterment of lymphedema patients and those with related lymphovenous disorders. The mission of LAS is to optimize health for lymphovenous patients through education and support, and increase the awareness of lymphedema and other lymphovenous disorders within the medical community and the general public of Saskatchewan.

What Is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is a lifelong condition caused by a build up of fluid (lymph). This happens when the lymphatic system is either faulty or damaged and does not function normally. This swelling is most often in the arm or leg, but can occur in the breast, trunk, genitals or head and neck. It can affect men, women or children of all ages. According to Dr. C Moffatt, Professor Of Clinical Nursing Research and head of the International Framework and Clinical Nursing Research, as much as 70% of lymphedema goes undiagnosed and the problem of lymphedema is growing.

Types of Lymphedema

There are 2 types of Lymphedema, primary and secondary:

- Primary Lymphedema occurs when a person is born with a faulty lymphatic system. Signs of lymphedema may be present at birth or develop during puberty or later. According to Dr. Moffatt, primary lymphedema accounts for about 17% of lymphedema.
- Secondary Lymphedema occurs when a person's lymphatic system is damaged by surgery, radiation therapy, severe trauma, recurrent infections, venous insufficiency, or filariasis (a severe type of lymphedema caused by mosquito bites in tropical countries). It can develop a short time after the damage has occurred or many years later. Secondary lymphedema is more common than primary lymphedema. According to Dr. Moffatt's research, only about 31% of secondary lymphedema is cancer related and about 67% is not.

Stages of Lymphedema

There are 4 stage of Lymphedema:

- **Stage 0: Latent/Early** No visible swelling; however there are some changes in the tissue, skin and how an affected limb feels.
- **Stage 1: Mild** Some visible swelling is present. The swelling is soft and may indent with thumb pressure. Swelling can be reversed.
- **Stage 2: Moderate** The swelling cannot be reversed and it takes more pressure to show an indent. A buildup of fatty tissue or tissue hardening (tissue fibrosis) can occur
- **Stage 3: Advanced** The swelling is extreme and the skin has hardened. The skin may also be drier and thicker with warty growths and leakage of lymph fluid (lymphorrhea).

Early Signs and Symptoms of Lymphedema

- Swelling that can be sudden, gradual or occasional in any of the previous mentioned parts of the body, but most often in the arm or leg.
- Clothing, shoes, rings and watches might start feeling tighter with no weight gain.
- Skin may feel tighter or stretched or thicker.

- Feeling of heaviness, tightness, fullness or heat in the affected area or aches, shooting pains or pins and needles in that area.

Increased Risk of Lymphedema

- A family history of long lasting swelling
- Surgery that removed or damaged lymph nodes.
- Radiation therapy or injury that damaged the lymphatic system.
- History of skin infections, including cellulitis.
- Chronic venous disease
- Being inactive and/or overweight.

How to Treat Lymphedema

Combined Decongestive Therapy (CDT) is the recognized treatment by the Canadian Lymphedema Framework and also the Lymphedema Association of Saskatchewan (LAS). This treatment consists of manual lymph drainage, compression bandaging, education to learn how to manage lymphedema, exercise to promote lymphatic flow and skin care to prevent infections. Certified Lymphedema Therapists provide this treatment and are listed on our website. Some health districts have public therapists, but not all of them. There is no charge to see a public therapist. There are also private therapists, but there is no government coverage for private therapists at this time. Some patients may carry private insurance that covers some of the costs.

Early diagnosis and treatment is the best way to manage Lymphedema.

Garments covered by SK Health (SAIL)

SK health will provide coverage for the following for a confirmed diagnosis of lymphedema:

- 2 compression garments per limb every 6 months with a doctor's referral and if measured by a Physical or Occupational Therapist, Enterostomal Therapy Nurse, Diabetes Nurse, Wound Care Nurse or Complex Decongestive Therapist
- 15-20 mmHg arm sleeve for clients who meet all the eligible criteria, but cannot tolerate 20mmHg or higher compression at the wrist.
- 1 night compression limited to once every 2 years.
- Bandaging/ wrapping supplies used for lymphatic drainage and adjustable non-elastic compression garments.
- Accessory supplies such as gel sheets, adhesives, stocking applicators, liners or rubber gloves when used in conjunction with an eligible compression garment.

We encourage you to check your private insurance to see if some of these garments are covered for you also.

For more information about lymphedema and LAS, visit our website www.sasklymph.ca or email us at sasklymph@gmail.com