

# Chronic oedema: a common but unrecognised condition

If you have swelling of your legs or feet lasting longer than three months, it could be chronic oedema. Here we describe the signs and symptoms and how to seek help.



**C**hronic oedema is relatively common, affecting one in every thousand adults in the UK, rising to one in every 12 adults aged over 85 years<sup>1</sup>. However, despite this, chronic oedema remains poorly recognised by people with the condition, and by some healthcare professionals.

## What is chronic oedema?

Chronic oedema is the term used to describe swelling of any cause that

has been present for longer than three months. It results when the lymphatic system fails to keep a balance between the fluid in the tissues and the circulation, leading to fluid collection in the limb and the development of swelling.

There are many reasons this can happen, ranging from standing or sitting for prolonged periods where gravity causes fluid to pool in the feet, or pregnancy and obesity in which extra

weight on the vessels in the tummy prevents lymphatic clearance. Other causes including surgery or trauma to the leg veins or lymph vessels, venous disease, or wider spread disease such as heart failure or renal disease. Some medications, e.g. calcium channel blockers or hormones, may also result in chronic oedema.

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However, chronic oedema doesn't become severe overnight but unfortunately, it is often at this stage when patients

seek help or when it is recognised by healthcare professionals as needing treatment. Mild chronic oedema is often overlooked or ignored by patients and healthcare professionals.

### What are the signs and symptoms?

Initially, swelling may be mild, and may go down after elevating the feet or going to bed. At this stage, it is common for the oedema to go untreated.

With time, however, the swelling will not reduce with rest and as the tissues of the leg remain filled with fluid, the skin can undergo changes, making it vulnerable to damage and infection. For example, the skin on the lower leg might become hard, or excess lymph fluid may leak through the legs (lymphorrhoea) making them wet and causing skin damage.

As the swelling worsens, the size and weight of the limb increases, making it uncomfortable to move, and can be painful. This in turn can make it difficult to take part in the normal activities of every day life, and can lead to difficulties with relationships and work. The swelling may be very mild or it can be severe, distorting the shape of the limb, and making it heavy and difficult to move.

### What to do if you think you have chronic oedema

If you have not yet seen a healthcare professional about your chronic oedema, you should visit your GP and explain your concerns. He/she should ask about the history of your swelling and should give you a physical examination to assess the swelling. Your GP may refer you for further investigations, for example, to a specialist oedema service.

### Managing chronic oedema

The management of chronic oedema is made up of skin care, exercise, and wearing compression. Combined, these three components of care help to improve and maintain skin health and drive fluid from the tissues where it causes swelling back into the circulation.

Key to the success of the management is developing a plan of care with your healthcare professional that is suited to you personally, that is appropriate for your condition and that you can maintain and are happy with in the long term. ▶