



Manual lymphatic drainage: doing it yourself

The key to treating lymphoedema is helping to move fluid out of the limbs back to the lymph nodes and vessels. One way of doing this is manual lymphatic drainage. We explain how this works and how you could try this yourself.



Lymphoedema develops when your lymphatic system becomes blocked and so is unable to remove excess fluid from your limbs. Manual lymphatic drainage involves gently manipulating certain areas of your body to move this excess fluid away from your limbs towards the working lymph vessels and lymph nodes. This helps to ease the swelling and allows this fluid to be removed from the limb.

What does it involve?

During manual lymphatic drainage a massage therapist will use light pressure and carefully chosen massage techniques to prepare and clear your lymphatic system. This usually starts with massage to stimulate the areas of your body that contain your lymph nodes, such as your armpits, neck and groin.



After this, they will encourage excess fluid from your limbs towards your lymph nodes, so that the lymph can reabsorb.

How might manual lymphatic drainage help me?

Lymphatic drainage may reduce the swelling in your limbs and help your lymph nodes to get rid of any toxins. Other possible benefits include:

- Supporting your immune system
- Reducing fluid retention
- Relief from nerve-related pain
- Making you feel less stressed.

What are the risks?

Manual lymphatic drainage is safe for many people, but should be avoided in people who have:

- Blood clots
- Cellulitis
- Deep vein thrombosis
- Fever
- Heart disease
- Infection
- Kidney failure
- Stroke.

It should also not be performed directly over cancerous tissue, or skin that has been affected by radiation therapy.

A few people may have side effects like feeling tired, sick or having a headache. If this happens to you, your healthcare professional can tell you how to reduce the risk of this happening in future.

How long until I feel the effects?

You might not feel an immediate benefit from manual lymphatic drainage, but

if you don't see an improvement after a few sessions, talk to your healthcare professional about other options.

Can I do this for myself?

In some cases you can be taught how to do manual lymphatic drainage on yourself at home. Depending on your physical condition, you may still need a trained manual therapist to perform this for you.

Is it worth it?

Manual lymphatic drainage can help to manage lymphoedema, but it should not be your only treatment. You should continue wearing your compression garments to help to reduce fluid retention. Manual lymphatic drainage may not work for everyone, but if performed properly it is not dangerous. ➤

The patient's view

I try to do manual lymph drainage ... to help my lymphatic system deal with flowing my lymph better. I would like to do it every day, but I don't have the time.

I have had it from a therapist and it has been very helpful. Lymphatic drainage massage from someone who is not me... [is] a great way to get the lymph system working, and to talk to someone who has seen a lot of lymphoedema is reassuring because it often normalises it for me.

Maria