

Lipoedema or lymphoedema: what's the difference?

Lipoedema and lymphoedema are both long-term conditions that can cause swelling of the lower limbs. However, they have different causes and symptoms. Here we explain the differences and where to get advice if you think you might be affected.

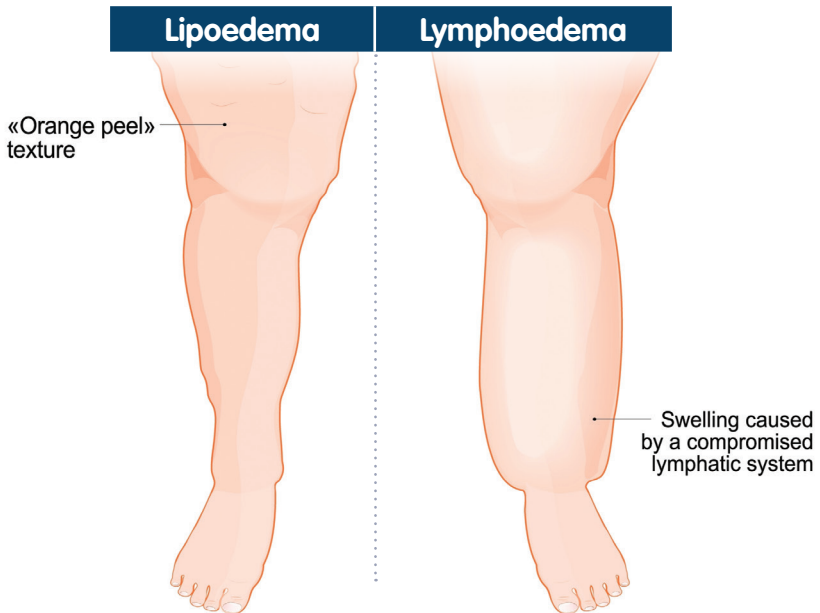
Lymphoedema and lipoedema are both conditions that involve enlargement of the limbs (usually the legs, but they can affect the arms), however, the conditions have different underlying causes.

Lymphoedema

Lymphoedema is a long-term condition arising from problems with the lymphatic system. The system consists of a network

of vessels and glands that drain excess fluid from the tissues and also helps to fight infection. If there is a problem with the lymphatics, it can result in a build up of fluid if the affected area, which can be seen as swelling¹.

There are two types of lymphoedema. primary lymphoedema is caused by a fault in the lymphatic system at birth and so



often becomes apparent in childhood or early adulthood. Secondary lymphoedema arises when there is damage caused to the lymphatics or a problem with the movement of fluid around the vessels, e.g. from cancer treatment, infection, or lack of limb movement.

Lipoedema

Lipoedema is a disorder caused by abnormal build-up of fat in the body. It commonly occurs in the lower limbs, resulting in a pronounced pear shape appearance, but can also occur in the arms². People with lipoedema usually have very large lower limbs that are similar

in shape and size on both sides. Thighs, hips and buttocks can be much larger than the rest of the upper body, while the feet and hands are almost never affected. Sometimes, people with lipoedema can go on to develop lymphatic dysfunction, resulting in a condition known as lipo-lymphoedema.

The signs and symptoms of lymphoedema and lipoedema and how they differ are presented below. If you think you might be affected by one of the conditions, speak to your healthcare professional or contact one of the patient charities below for advice and support. ➡

For lymphoedema: www.lymphoedema.org

For lipoedema: www.lipoedema.co.uk

Sign or symptom	Lymphoedema	Lipoedema
Area affected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any part of the body – usually legs and arms, including hands and feet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Usually legs – rarely arms Hands and feet almost never affected
Location of swelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Usually one limb only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Usually symmetrical with both limbs affected
Appearance and feel of the skin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tissues will feel tight The skin is often thickened and may have changes Limbs do not bruise easily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loose tissues Skin is soft and supple but pale and cold to the touch compared to unaffected parts of the body Bruising easily often without any touching
Gender affected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can affect men and women of any ages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occurs in females mainly, rare in males
Family history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary lymphoedema be hereditary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is a hereditary condition
Pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limb is usually not painful when pressure is applied to the skin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The affected area is often tender or painful when touched. Painful knees are a common feature