

# Breast Cancer & Lymphedema



Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers in Canada, with an estimated 27,000+ women being diagnosed in 2021. Coping with both a diagnosis and treatment for cancer can be a very emotional and physical journey for the patient and their family. Due to the removal of lymph nodes and possible radiation therapy, secondary lymphedema (aka swelling) of the arm and chest affects roughly a quarter of breast cancer patients.

## Symptoms of Secondary Lymphedema can include:

- a feeling of fullness or heaviness in the arm or chest
- swelling
- tightness and possible dryness of the skin
- pain and/or discomfort
- decrease range of motion in elbow and shoulder joints

This condition can create additional discomfort, pain and anxiety, but can be successfully treated and managed by MLD and specific home-care.



## What is Manual Lymph Drainage (MLD)?

MLD is a very gentle, light hands on technique that improves the efficiency of our body's waste disposal system known as the lymphatic system. The specific techniques gently stimulate the skin which influences the rate of removal of

waste, toxins and excess fluid from the body's connective tissues through the lymphatic vessels. MLD uses the lymphatic system to reduce and ease the discomfort from the swelling. This treatment is also highly beneficial for our immune and nervous systems and thus an extra bonus when one is experiencing a lot of stress in their life.

## How is MLD used to treat Secondary Lymphedema after Breast Cancer?

Combined Decongestive Therapy (CDT) is a treatment that combines MLD, compression garments, exercise and skin care to best treat and manage lymphedema. The therapist will design your treatment plan that would best suit your symptoms and surgical procedures. The therapist will move the excess fluid from the affected areas into a functioning lymph vessel system. This creates alternative routes for which the fluid can be taken away and reduce the swelling.

The MLD treatment is followed by the fitting of a compression garment to maintain the reduced limb size. The therapist will also discuss how to minimize the risk of infection through proper skin care and discuss the importance of regular gentle exercise to encourage efficient lymph flow.

## What to expect with your MLD treatment.

It is important to seek out a therapist who has proper training in MLD and CDT. Some of the most well trained therapists are **Vodder certified**. These therapists have taken extra courses to thoroughly understand the lymphatic system and when to, and, when not to, treat certain conditions or complications. During your initial visit a treatment plan will be suggested to maximize your results. The MLD treatment is very similar to a massage therapy treatment in that you

will be asked to disrobe and get onto a massage table. As described during your initial treatment, specific areas of the body will be treated with the gentle, rhythmical touch of MLD. Treatment of lymphedema can fall into two categories:

- *Phase One:* an intensive treatment period for reduction of the swollen area
- *Phase Two:* a maintenance phase intended to keep the area as reduced as possible after the intensive Phase One treatment

### **Are there any side effects to MLD treatments?**

There are usually no bad side effects after an MLD treatment. Some people may experience fatigue and report that they slept really well. It is highly beneficial to drink water after your treatment and you may notice an increase in the need to go to the bathroom. This is a positive side effect as the re-energized lymphatic system begins to recycle excess fluid and waste.



**For more information**

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