



WHEN ISN'T



Therapist Michele applies kinesio tape to a patient's leg

If your lymphatic system gets damaged, the results can be very painful

When you've battled cancer and think you're now past the worst, the last thing you expect is to be permanently stricken with a condition that leaves part of your body swollen and sore. But lymphoedema, or swelling of tissues, often affects people who've had breast and other cancers. You can also be born with it.

Brave young mum Michelle Walker – whose story is on page 30 in the Weekly People section of this magazine – says she found lymphoedema worse than cancer.

After lymph nodes in Michelle's groin were removed as part of her treatment, her leg became so swollen she couldn't lie down and had to sleep in a chair. She was in so much pain that, despite constant morphine, she was still in agony. Fortunately, not all cases are this severe, but lymphoedema can have a devastating effect on your life.

WHAT IS LYMPHOEDEMA?

Lymph fluid in our bodies carries water and nourishment to our tissues. After it has done its job, it is collected by a system of drainage tubes called the lymphatic system, then moved through the lymph nodes and returned to our blood. If our lymphatic system is damaged or inadequate, it can't cope with the usual amount of fluid so it builds up in our tissues, causing swelling. This is known as lymphoedema.

WHO GETS IT?

There are two types of lymphoedema, primary and secondary. Primary lymphoedema is thought to be due to a poorly formed lymphatic system. It appears either at birth, at puberty, or after the age of about 35. Secondary lymphoedema affects some people after surgery involving the

lymph nodes – for example, breast-cancer patients who have lymph nodes under the arm removed to check if cancer has spread. Radiotherapy can also damage lymphatic vessels. If you have both surgery and radiation, the chances of lymphoedema increase. One New Zealand study found that about 10% to 40% of women develop lymphoedema after breast cancer surgery. It can take months or even years to develop.

HOW WILL I KNOW IF I'M GETTING IT?

You may notice changes in sensation in the affected part of the body, feelings of tightness or heaviness and swelling. Your skin may change colour, and your jewellery, clothing or shoes could feel tighter.

HOW DOES IT AFFECT YOU?

The swelling can make your limb feel heavy and cause difficulty with some movements. It may look unsightly, which can be upsetting. Some cases are mild, but in others, the extra fluid can press on nerves and cause pain. In very severe cases the limb may become so swollen the skin can burst. If you suffer an injury like a cut, you can get

BIGGER BETTER



Compression garments and bandages can help reduce swelling

an infection of the tissues (cellulitis) that can cause the affected part to swell even more and become red, tender and painful. If fluid builds up over many years, it can result in scarring and a condition called fibrosis.

CAN IT BE PREVENTED?

If you've had surgery to your lymphatic system or radiation you can try to cut your risk of getting lymphoedema by:

- * Wearing compression garments and move frequently whenever you travel by plane.
- * Protecting yourself from sprains, fractures or wounds and your feet and hands from cuts by wearing shoes and gloves.
- * Treating minor cuts or any sort of infection straightaway.
- * Not lifting or pushing heavy objects.
- * Not getting sunburnt.
- * Maintaining a healthy weight. If you've already got lymphoedema, following this advice can help prevent it getting worse.

WHAT'S THE TREATMENT?

The main forms of treatment are: **Lymphatic drainage massage** by a trained lymphoedema therapist. This clears the backlog of lymph fluid and

helps the lymphatic system work better. Don't go to a regular massage or beauty therapist. Ordinary massage may make lymphoedema worse.

Compression garments or bandages

These need to be worn all the time – except when you're asleep – to reduce swelling and stop the skin from stretching.

Elevating the affected part of the body so that any lymphatic fluid can be free to flow back.

General exercise such as walking, cycling or swimming.

Specific lymphatic exercises, which a lymphoedema therapist can teach you.

ANOTHER OPTION

By the time Michelle Walker went to see lymphoedema therapist Michele Urlich, her right leg was swollen to twice its size. The leg was so painful she was crying and had to be carried from the car. But within 20 minutes of the treatment starting, the pain had eased. And an hour later, she was able to walk away from the clinic without help. That night, Michelle could lie in bed for the first time in months and slept right through the night. In a couple of days, she was off morphine and her leg was almost back to its usual size. She lost 4.7 litres of fluid.

So what did the therapist do?

"First, I did lymphatic drainage massage," explains Michele. "Then I applied a special tape called Kinesio tape. This acts as the therapist's hands when the therapist is not there." The tape is laid on the skin over the lymphatic pathways that run underneath. When the patient moves, the tape lifts the skin, making more space between the skin and the muscle below.

ABOUT KINESIO TAPE

- * It doesn't work for everyone, especially if you've had lymphoedema for a long time.
- * You need to wear the tape 24/7.
- * You may still need to wear compression garments or bandages.
- * It should only be applied by a trained lymphoedema therapist.
- * You have to be mobile for it to work.



WHO TO CONTACT...

For details on how to find a lymphoedema therapist near you, contact Joy Donohoe of the Auckland Lymphoedema Support Group, phone (09) 625 6463 or email donofam@ihug.co.nz



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