

Lymphedema

Condition: Lymphedema is a progressive condition in which abnormal levels of fluid accumulate in the body tissues of the upper and lower limbs.

Background: Between 24% and 49% of patients develop lymphedema after a mastectomy, and between 4% and 28% develop the condition after a lumpectomy. After pelvic surgery or radiation treatment, its incidence is between 1% and 47%. Only 2% of cases are due to infection.

Risk Factors: There are several risk factors for lymphedema. These include primary disorders (associated with genetic mutations or age) or secondary causes, which are typically associated with cancer (breast, gynecologic, urologic, melanoma and lymphoma) and/or cancer treatments, such as radiation, mastectomy, lumpectomy or lymph node dissection. Trauma, infection and obesity are other risk factors.

History and Symptoms: Patients may complain of a feeling of “fullness” or “heaviness” in the affected limb. Other symptoms include inflammation, disfigurement, decreased mobility and limb function, skin breakdown or infection, and fat deposits.

Physical Exam: Patients typically provide a medical history and undergo a physical exam and functional assessment.

Diagnostic Process: To diagnose lymphedema, healthcare providers assess a patient’s inflammation and swelling, skin condition, range of motion, limb circumference, walking ability and activities of daily living.

Rehab Management: A physician who specializes in physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) may be able to help diagnose and identify appropriate treatment methods. Functional evaluation may also be performed by a PM&R physician to determine limitations to walking and daily activities based on severity and type of lymphedema. Treatments include therapy to remove lymph fluid from the affected limbs and to reduce swelling. This may involve physical or occupational therapy; compression devices, low-stretch or inelastic compression bandaging or compression garments; skin hygiene to minimize infection risk; and exercises to improve range of motion. Long-term self-management, including proper skin care, compression garments, weight control and exercise, is key to prevent reaccumulation of lymph fluid and complications. Some patients may need surgery to manage their symptoms.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: Patient and family education information is available through the National Lymphedema Network (www.lymphnet.org) and the American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org).

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.