



10 THINGS INDIVIDUALS WITH LYMPHEDEMA (LE) NEED TO KNOW ABOUT FIBROSIS

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WHAT IS FIBROSIS?

Individuals with long-standing lymphedema (LE) may experience *fibrosis*, which occurs as lymph fluid continually collects in a limb, causing the limb to become hard and dense. Fibrosis makes the affected area feel thick; it also may feel leathery or tighter than other areas.

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WHAT CAUSES FIBROSIS?

Tissue fibrosis can be caused by repeated infections, chemotherapy, radiation damage, and other trauma. Fibrosis also is caused by swelling for extended periods of time. Often, it begins just above the top of a compression sleeve or stocking.

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HOW CAN I PREVENT FIBROSIS?

Fibrosis can only be prevented by early diagnosis of LE, by immediate treatment, and by consistent attention to self-care. Unfortunately, diagnosis of LE often is delayed, so the focus needs to be on treatment rather than prevention of fibrosis.

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DOES FIBROSIS GET WORSE?

With each stage of LE there also is a change in the tissue texture of a limb. Each stage of LE presents additional difficulties and worsening of fibrosis, if treatment is not received.

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HOW IS FIBROSIS TREATED?

The recognized "gold standard" non-surgical treatment is lymphatic massage therapy or manual lymph drainage (MLD). This therapy must be followed by consistent, daily skin care, compression bandaging or garments, exercise, and good dietary habits leading to weight control.

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CAN FIBROSIS BE REVERSED?

Fibrosis generally cannot be reversed but may be improved by a program of decongestive therapy and through the use of special aids (referred to as chips or chip bags) used in conjunction with compression bandaging. However, suction assisted protein lipectomy (SAPL) is required to remove any accumulated solids in individuals with chronic LE.

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WHAT ARE CHIPS TO TREAT FIBROSIS?

These "chips" are custom cut pieces of foam placed underneath the compression bandage on top of the area of especially hardened (fibrotic) tissue. Chips provide targeted, additional compression that helps soften the hardness.

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IS THERE ANYTHING NEW TO TREAT FIBROSIS?

A treatment that shows promise is low level laser. Check with your CLT or physician to learn more about this approach to helping break down fibrotic tissue. Some therapists also use a negative pressure device or metal, ceramic, or plastic tools to help soften the fibrotic tissue. Only a CLT should use these methods.

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WHAT HAPPENS IF FIBROSIS IS UNTREATED?

Fibrosis can eventually cause vascular problems and predispose the individual to *cellulitis*, a dangerous infection. Fibrosis that is left unchecked will affect blood flow and supply. It is essential to treat fibrosis as soon as it occurs.

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WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT FIBROSIS?

Check areas of swelling daily for signs of denseness or hardness. Once fibrosis is evident, consistent work on treating it is essential. Your CLT can help with ways to keep fibrosis from getting worse.



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