



OEDEMA OR LYMPHOEDEMA: SWOLLEN LEGS AND FEET

Sometimes our legs or feet become swollen and feel uncomfortable. This is known as oedema and it happens when fluid in our lower legs or feet has trouble returning back up through the body.

WHAT CAN CAUSE LEGS AND FEET TO SWELL?

Venous hypertension / insufficiency

'Venous' is anything related to our veins. Swelling often happens when our veins are not working as well as they should. Blood is pumped from our heart to the rest of our body through our arteries and returns to our heart through your veins. Blood is then propelled back to our heart by our heart pumping. Our leg and foot muscles help this along by circulating blood as you walk and move your ankles.

Our veins contain one-way valves that stop the blood falling back towards your toes. These valves can become weak or damaged. When this happens, our veins become swollen (varicose veins) that blood is forced into the tissue of your skin making it swell.

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WHAT DOES OEDEMA LOOK LIKE?

Oedema is a buildup of fluid in the tissues of the body. The swelling can occur in one particular part of the body (for example the feet or ankles), or may be more general, depending on the cause. This image shows a chronic case.



Lymphoedema

Legs and feet can also become swollen if we have problems with our lymphatic system. This is known as lymphoedema. The lymphatic system can be thought of as a waste disposal system that takes tissue fluid and waste products away from the tissues around your skin, fat, muscle and bone.

Once the tissue fluid is inside the lymphatic vessels, which are just under the surface of our skin, it becomes known as 'lymph'. Lymph is then transported in one direction by larger and deeper lymphatic vessels. Lymph moves when we are active and when we breathe deeply, so any physical activity helps the lymph vessels work better and prevent or reduce any swelling. Being active is an essential part of treatment.

Cardiac oedema

Swelling in the lower legs can also be caused by right-sided congestive heart failure. This is known as cardiac oedema and also causes shortness of breath and weight gain. It is important that cardiac oedema is considered if you are being treated for these symptoms, and before you are prescribed compression therapy. However someone with a cardiac problem may also have other problems, such as lymphoedema, that must be treated.

Lipoedema

Our legs and feet can also swell if we have a condition called lipoedema. Lipoedema is a condition that makes us accumulate fat below the waist, so our hips, buttocks and legs appear out of proportion to your upper body. It can also affect our arms. Lipoedema looks and feels different to normal body fat – it is softer and dimpled, like cellulite.

Lipoedema is thought to be a genetic inherited condition because often more than one family member is affected. It is thought to only affect women but there are very rare reports of men with similar signs and symptoms.

You can read more about lipoedema on our lipoedema page or visit lipoedema.co.uk.

GETTING DIAGNOSED

If your legs or feet are swollen, make an appointment at your GP practice. You might be given an appointment to see the nurse rather than the doctor as nurses are often responsible for caring for patients with leg problems.

Alternatively, there might be a Leg Club or specialist leg clinic in your area. You don't need a referral from your GP to go to one of these

Remember to remove any nail polish from your toenails before your appointment.

When you see the nurse or doctor, they should:

- Ask about your symptoms and how long you have had problems
- Examine your lower legs
- Do a special test called a Doppler Ultrasound. This test measures the blood pressure in your ankle and compares it to the pressure in your arm to see if you have problems with the blood supply to your lower leg. You may have to come back to have your Doppler test on another day or at another clinic but you should have this test within a few weeks of your first appointment.

You might also be offered some other tests to check for other health problems such as diabetes and anaemia that can affect your legs.

If your GP practice thinks you have problems with your veins or arteries, they might refer you for further tests at your local hospital or specialist clinic.

TREATMENT

The treatment for swollen legs depends on what has caused the swelling.

Compression therapy (support bandages or socks)

If your legs or feet are swollen because of venous insufficiency or lymphoedema and there are no problems with the blood supply to your legs or feet, then you are likely to require compression therapy. Compression therapy improves blood supply by applying pressure to the leg. This can be done by bandaging the lower leg or by wearing supportive socks, stockings or tights. Compression therapy is very effective at reducing swelling and healing or preventing sores or ulcers.

There are lots of different types of compression therapy so ask your nurse to find something that is right for you. Your legs may feel uncomfortable at times in compression stockings or bandages. This is often towards the end of the day when your legs can become more swollen. This can be relieved by elevating your legs for a good amount of time, stretching your ankles and calf muscles - wiggling toes can also help. You may have been experiencing pain in your ulcer before compression treatment. We would advise that you continue with any pain relief you may have been prescribed. Compression stockings or bandages should not increase pain. If your pain increases or becomes severe, contact the nurse or doctor who prescribed them.

HEALTHCARE ADVICE

There are some lifestyle changes you can make to help reduce your swelling:

- Maintain a healthy weight
- Be as active as you can. Aim to take light to moderate exercise such as swimming or walking for about thirty minutes at least three times a week.
- Avoid standing for a long time – keep your feet and legs moving as much as you can.
- Try to avoid sitting for long periods with your legs down, put your feet up – elevate your legs above your heart.

Every so often, move your feet around in circles, then up and down. This helps your blood circulate and get back to your heart.

Find out more about the campaign and how you can get involved

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