

Cellulitis & Lymphedema ~ What You Need to Know

- Cellulitis occurs because of a dysfunctional lymphatic system (LS) not picking up the normal load of tissue fluid in the affected area. Tissue fluid has a protein content which due to LS dysfunction builds up. This attracts bacteria which multiply in the stagnant area.
- The LS is part of the body's immune response, designed to trigger antibodies which would counteract infection. Thus, immunity is compromised in the area of lymphatic dysfunction. This can quickly spread becoming a systemic problem, invading more of the body.
- The occurrence of cellulitis may be the first sign that someone actually has a dysfunction of the lymphatic system even before lymphedema is evident.
- The occurrence of cellulitis may cause lymphatic damage possibly leading to lymphedema.

Signs of Cellulitis:

- Includes: redness, rash or blotches, streaking, shiny skin, fever >38C, pain, warmth, chills, flu symptoms, vomiting, diarrhea, or increased draining from an existing wound.

What to do:

- At the first sign, on the affected skin, outline the area of redness to document its size & shape. This provides a baseline to show the pace of change.
- Call your doctor or a health care professional.
- If no alternative and more symptoms develop, go to ER.
- Don't delay or ignore overnight, the condition can deteriorate quickly.
- It is important to start taking an oral antibiotic at the very first sign. For more severe symptoms IV antibiotic may be required.

At the Hospital:

- Explain that you have lymphedema.
- Be prepared with information about Lymphedema to educate the attending health care staff. Lymphedema is still little understood in some communities.
- Be prepared to advocate for yourself, about what needs to happen.
- Go back to hospital if your condition is not improving within the expected timeline or getting worse
- Do not have MLD until the cellulitis begins to resolve with the appropriate antibiotic treatment.
- Wear your compression garment, if comfortable; if uncomfortable, pause wearing the compression garment until the affected area can comfortably tolerate compression again (usually after treatment begins with antibiotics).

How to Avoid Cellulitis

- Protect your immune response functionality: avoid getting overtired or stressed.
- Wear proper compression, to help keep lymph fluid moving.
- Be diligent in all conservative measures for managing lymphedema.
- Avoid puncture wounds, wear protective clothing when gardening or doing task with risk of cuts or wounds.
- Avoid insect bites, mosquitos are attracted to the protein rich fluid which accumulates in lymphedema limbs.
- Use an antibiotic ointment on any wounds or skin punctures.
- Some patients have a 14-day antibiotic prescription on hand at home but definitely in medical kit when travelling. Talk to your Dr. about this.