

What is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is a chronic disease marked by the increased collection of lymphatic fluid in the body, causing swelling, which can lead to skin and tissue changes. The chronic, progressive accumulation of protein rich fluid within the interstitium and the fibro-adipose tissue exceeds the capacity of the lymphatic system to transport the fluid.

Swelling associated with lymphedema can occur anywhere in the body, including the arms, legs, genitals, face, neck, chest wall, and oral cavity. There are many psychological, physical, and social sequelae related to a diagnosis of lymphedema. This activity reviews the presentation of lymphedema and highlights the role of the interprofessional team in its management.

The lymphatic system functions as a critical portion of the body's immune system and returns interstitial fluid to the bloodstream. Lymphedema is most frequently a complication of cancer treatment.

Types of Lymphedema

Lymphedema is of two types : Primary lymphedema and secondary lymphedema

Primary lymphedema is an inherited or congenital condition that causes a malformation of the lymphatics system, most often because of genetic mutation. Primary lymphedema can be subdivided into 3 categories:

- 1) congenital lymphedema, present at birth or recognized within two years of birth;
- 2) lymphedema praecox, occurring at puberty or the beginning of the third decade; or
- 3) lymphedema tarda, which begins after 35 years of age.

Secondary lymphedema results from insult, injury, or obstruction to the lymphatic system. While the most common cause of lymphedema worldwide is filariasis caused by infection by *Wuchereria bancrofti*, in developed countries, most secondary lymphedema cases are due to malignancy or related to the treatment of malignancy. This includes

surgical excision of lymph nodes, local radiation treatment, or medical therapy. Breast cancer is the most common cancer associated with secondary lymphedema in developed countries.

Gradings of Lymphedema

Lymphedema Grading tool, which assesses the severity of extremity lymphedema based on objective limb measurements and provides appropriate options for management.