

# Finding Balance

## Managing Lymphedema Symptoms

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Preventing and managing lymphedema symptoms such as swelling, aching and the feeling of heaviness is about finding balance. If the demands on the lymph vessel system outweigh the capacity of this system, then swelling occurs.

### **Demand – Capacity = Symptom**

For example if the demand is to return 200 mL/day of fluid to the heart but the capacity is only 180 mL/day, then since the demand is greater than the capacity, 20 mL of fluid gets left behind in the affected tissues which looks and feels like swelling.

### **200 – 180 = 20mL of swelling**

However, if the demand was reduced OR the capacity was increased, then there would be no swelling. For example if the demand was reduced to 170 mL/day, there would be a reserve of 10 ml left.

### **170 – 180 = -10 mL (reserve)**

Or if the capacity was increased to 210 ml/day, there would also be a reserve.

### **200 – 210 = -10 mL (reserve)**

Therefore, when managing or trying to prevent lymphedema, one is aiming at no additional or new symptoms which means having a reserve or a balance of zero. This involves becoming aware of what makes your symptoms better or worse and planning to balance these. The demand on the lymph vessel system is basically the sum of everything you have done during the day. Therefore it may or may not be one particular activity that has resulted in new symptoms. It may be like going to the dollar store where everything only costs a dollar.

When you come to pay you have spent \$25.00 but you only have a twenty-dollar bill in your wallet. It wasn't any one item that pushed you over your capacity to pay but the sum of the parts.

To move beyond the simple to the more complex, once the lymph vessel system gets overloaded, the vessels may become distended themselves which prevents their muscles from working efficiently. The fact of being swollen further reduces their capacity to function. Then self-massage or compression which would assist the system in moving fluid could increase the capacity once again.

Finding this fluid balance is a little like balancing your finances. If you spend more than you have you are in the red. If you don't have overdraft insurance (which is not available for lymphedema) the bank will return your NSF cheque or phone your home to discuss repayment. Like financial budgeting it is easier to manage if the overdraft or the swelling is kept to a small amount. One can repay or "catch up" fairly easily. When debt or swelling gets too big then larger measures are needed to return to balance.

With these ideas in mind, the following chart gives some ideas about things that increase demand on the lymph vessel system and thus could make lymphedema symptoms appear or worsen. It also gives ideas about things that increase the capacity of the lymph vessel system and could therefore improve or prevent lymphedema symptoms



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**Things that Increase  
Demand on LVS**  
*(May make Lymphedema  
symptoms worse)*

Cuts, scrapes, insect bites which become infected  
Punctures such as injections or IV's  
Blood Pressure being taken on an affected limb  
Airplane flights due to change in cabin pressure  
Prolonged exposure to heat such as more than 15 minutes in a hot tub or immersion in water above 102°F.  
Extreme cold  
Hot humid summer days  
Dry cracked skin which could allow bacteria into limb  
Too much exercise – either too much weight or resistance or too long in duration or too repetitive in timing  
Sunburn  
Infections can lead to redness, increased swelling, fever and flu like symptoms  
Tight clothing or jewelry  
Prolonged inactivity  
Being overweight  
Emotional stress – increases blood flow to the arms and legs while tightening the neck and chest thus restricting lymphatic return to that area. This could include things like worrying, fear, anxiety or even the stress of preparing for happy events.

**Things that Increase  
Capacity of LVS**  
*(May make Lymphedema  
symptoms better)*

Gradually and routinely building up duration and intensity of any activity or exercise  
Changing activities frequently to avoid too much repetition for any affected areas. For example only vacuuming one room at a time, not the whole house.  
Avoiding unusual strenuous activities that you have not prepared for such as joining a gym and overdoing it on the first day or moving a lot of furniture when you are not used to it.  
Self-massage – this could be done daily before the day starts or at the end of the day to help the affected area “catch up”. It could also be used throughout the day to encourage areas that are having more difficulty.  
Using visualization to stimulate the lymph vessel system  
Compression garments can help support the limb to return lymph to the heart instead of allowing it to pool in the tissues. They can be worn during the waking hours or just for exercise or air flights depending on the extent of the lymphedema or risk of lymphedema.  
Compression bandages can be used to reduce the size of the limb or to help recover from occasional days when more swelling occurred  
Air conditioning can help on hot sticky days in the summer.