

Lymphatic drainage

Lymphatic drainage is an important part of lymphoedema treatment. It's a form of massage that helps stimulate the lymphatic system and encourages the flow of lymph fluid. This encourages lymph to drain out of the affected area into an area that drains normally.

Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) is a specialised massage technique that should only be practised by trained therapists.

You can also learn to do a simplified version of MLD at home yourself, called simple lymphatic drainage (SLD). It's important that you're taught this by a specialist. SLD helps stimulate the lymph channels and drain excess fluid.

Lymphatic drainage should be used in combination with deep breathing exercises before and after the therapy as this helps encourage the lymphatic drainage.

MLD

Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) is a specialised, gentle type of skin massage which may be used as part of your lymphoedema treatment. The aim is to encourage the extra lymph fluid to move away from the swollen area so it can drain normally.

MLD also improves lymph fluid drainage through the healthy lymph vessels, which helps control swelling.

Breathing techniques are also an important part of this treatment MLD may be especially helpful if you have lymphoedema in your:

- face
- neck
- breast
- trunk (body)
- genitals

Having MLD

MLD works while you are receiving the treatment. To help keep the swelling down you will be taught how to do a simplified version of MLD yourself at home while you are having the treatment.

It's a type of self-massage called simple lymphatic drainage (SLD) MLD is usually given for 30-40 minutes once a week for a course of six treatments at which point your oedema will be reassessed and follow on maintenance will be discussed and planned.

You'll usually be lying down and may have to remove some of your clothing, unless you have lymphoedema of the head and neck area. Your practitioner will begin by treating unaffected lymph nodes. They will use some pressure and slow, rhythmical movements.

MLD is not used if you have an infection (cellulitis) therefore if you have an infection during the course of your treatment your treatment will be delayed.

SLD

Your lymphoedema specialist may suggest simple lymphatic drainage (SLD) as part of your lymphoedema treatment. This is a simplified version of manual lymphatic drainage (MLD). It's important that you're taught these techniques by a lymphoedema specialist before you start. They can also teach a friend or relative to do it.

Doing SLD

Your lymphoedema specialist will explain how to do the massage and show you the right amount of pressure to apply. This will depend on your individual situation.

The aim of this massage is to stimulate the lymph channels on the body (trunk) to clear the way ahead so excess fluid can drain away. Once these channels have been cleared, the excess lymph from the swollen side will be able to drain away more easily.

It is best to choose a time and a place where you can do SLD in a relaxed way and won't be interrupted or distracted. Make sure you have everything you need before you start and get yourself into a comfortable position. Remember to do your deep breathing exercises first (see below).

The massage is done without any oils or creams, using your hand very gently to move the skin in a particular direction. The skin is always moved in the direction away from the swollen side.

Deep breathing exercises

Before and after MLD and SLD massage, breathing exercises can help to encourage lymphatic drainage.

Use the following simple exercises:

- Sit upright in a comfortable chair or lie on your bed with your knees slightly bent.
- Rest your hands on your ribs.
- Take slow deep breaths to relax.
- As you breathe in, direct the air down to your tummy (abdomen), which you will feel rising under your hands.
- Breathe out slowly by 'sighing' the air out. While breathing out, let your abdomen relax in again.
- Do the deep breathing exercises five times.

- Have a short rest before before getting up, to avoid feeling dizzy.