Lipedema

What is it?

Lipedema is build-up of extra fat under the skin. This is usually from the waist to above the ankles. It sometimes includes the belly (abdomen) or arms, but not usually the ankles or feet.

We don’t fully know what causes this build-up. This disease may be passed down through the family. It is much more common in women than men. The disease usually starts around puberty and is often accompanied by hormonal disorders.

What are the symptoms?

• Extra fat in the legs, hips and belly, which is a gradual but ongoing process. The skin feels more like rubber, and is not hard or firm. Elevating (putting up) the legs does not reduce the build-up.

• Pain when pressure is applied to skin, especially in the inner thigh and the base of the spine. As the disease progresses, pain is often caused by the lightest of touches, particularly later in the day. It may also be painful to cross the legs or sit with pressure on the spine (self-pressure).

• Legs bruise easily.

• Hands may feel clammy or damp but limbs are cold.

• Skin may have an orange peel look.

• Feeling pins and needles. Moving the limbs can help ease this feeling.

• Obesity caused by overeating does respond to the right diet. Lipedema does not.

• Joint pains, especially in the knees. Infection of the limb is not normally a problem.

Will it get worse?

As you live with the disease, your lower body will continue to get larger. The extra, expanding fat cells interfere with the lymph system (a network of nodes and vessels that removes extra fluid and returns it to the bloodstream). You may develop secondary lymphedema, or lipo-lymphedema. In this disease, extra fluid builds up in your lower legs and feet. This swelling often gets worse as the day goes on.

People with lipedema are at high risk for obesity. This is because the fat from lipedema can't be lost. Also, as the disease gets worse, you may move around less.

How is it treated?

Treatment called Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT) can reduce the swelling of lipo-lymphedema. CDT can’t cure lipedema. But CDT can help ease pain and hypersensitivity. Treatment may include:

• Manual lymphatic drainage, or gentle massage-like treatment. This moves fluid from backed up (congested) areas to healthy areas where the lymph system works well. This can reduce pain and help you move easier.
• Compression bandages and garments to help prevent fluid build-up and ease pain. The pressure of compression over a period of time may help shrink the size (but not the number of) fat cells.

• Exercises that will help your lymph system work better. They will also move fluid out of swollen legs and torso.

• Skin care to prevent dryness and skin infections.

• A home care program. Your therapist will create a treatment program that meets your specific needs.

What about other types of treatment?

• Careful liposuction may reduce the fat, but it can also destroy tissues. Long-term results have not been proven.

• We do not advise other reduction surgeries.

• Pumps may cause too much pain to be useful.

Practice healthy habits

• Eat a healthy diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Avoid foods that are high in fat or salt.

• Drink 6 to 8 glasses of water each day to help flush out your system.

• Don’t smoke and avoid alcohol.

• Wear loose-fitting clothing on you legs and feet. Avoid clothes that are tight at your waist.

• Change positions often.

• Exercise often and stay as active as possible.

Most important—remember

People with lipedema are often blamed for being overweight or are told they eat too much or are “cheating” on their diets. Please remember lipedema is caused by genetics and is not your fault.

Do I need an order to see a therapist?

Yes. An order is a prescription for therapy. Your order must come from a doctor who is licensed in Minnesota.

After we get your order, a CDT therapist will evaluate you.

For more information about our services, call your local Edema Treatment Center, listed below.

Fairview Edema Treatment Centers

Fairview Chisago Lakes Clinic
11725 Stinson Ave.
Chisago City, MN 55013
tel: 651-982-7825
fax: 651-257-8437

Fairview Northland Medical Center
911 Northland Dr.
Princeton, MN 55371
tel: 763-389-6420
fax: 763-389-6410

Fairview Rehabilitation Services
150 Cobblestone Lane
Burnsville, MN 55337
Tel: 952-460-4960 (to set up first visit, call 612-273-6228)
Fax: 612-273-7360

Fairview Southdale Hospital
6401 France Ave. S.
Edina, MN 55435
Tel: 952-924-1340 (to set up first visit, call 612-273-6228)
Fax: 612-273-7360

University of Minnesota Medical Center
West Bank
2450 Riverside Ave.
Minneapolis, MN 55454
Tel: 612-273-5560 (to set up first visit, call 612-273-6228)
Fax: 612-273-7360