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Manual lymphatic drainage

What is this?

Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) is a specialised skin stretching technique or massage that is carried out by a trained therapist. Hand movements are very gentle and rhythmic to stretch your skin and stimulate your lymphatic system. The skin is moved in specific directions based on the underlying anatomy and physiology of the lymphatic system and your specific needs.

What are the benefits?

The aim of MLD is to direct lymph fluid away from the swollen area into a functioning part of your lymphatic system. It is used to decongest oedematous areas, improve lymphatic drainage and soften tissues. Your therapist will start by clearing the adjacent lymph nodes and will open up a lymphatic pathway to unaffected nodes in your armpit, above your collar bone (clavicle), in your neck or groin.

MLD may be used together with Intermittent Pneumatic Compression – a machine that massages your arm or leg in a similar way to how your therapist would massage it. Your therapist will discuss this with you.

What should I expect?

As the massage is given directly on the skin you will be asked to partially undress, so that the therapists can work directly on the affected area and surrounding tissues.

If you would like a third person to be present during your treatment please let your therapist know.
Each individual session of MLD can last from 30 to 60 minutes depending on the area being treated, the extent of the oedema and other treatments used.

What is simple lymphatic drainage?

You will be taught a simplified massage technique called Simple Lymphatic Drainage (SLD). You will need to carry this out several times a day (or as instructed by your therapist), during your treatment period to extend the benefits of the MLD and continue to encourage contra lateral drainage. At the end of your treatment you will need to continue with the SLD as instructed to maintain the improvements achieved.

Are there any risks or complications?

If you develop an infection in the oedematous area, pain or redness please stop your SLD and let the clinic know. Please contact your GP for a review as to whether a course of antibiotics is needed. Concerns have been raised that manual lymphatic drainage may cause the spread of an existing cancer, but there is no evidence to support this belief.

If you would like to have ongoing private MLD we recommend that you contact MLD UK http://www.mlduk.org.uk/ Tel 0844 800 1988 to find a registered therapist in your area.

Contact us

If you have any questions please contact:

Lymphoedema Clinic

Mon – Fri 8am – 4pm
Tel 01872 252885 or 252601
rch-tr.lymphoedema@nhs.net

For further information and support please visit our website:

www.royalcornwall.nhs.uk/services/therapies/occupational-therapy/lymphoedema/

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

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