

Health

New clinic brings treatment to Castlemaine for the first time

Do you suffer from painful swelling of the lower limbs or arms? You're not alone.

According to the Australian Lymphology Association 40,000 people in Australia and New Zealand are living with this condition, known as lymphoedema.

While there's no cure for lymphoedema, treatment can reduce the severity of symptoms dramatically and improve quality of life. A new lymphoedema clinic at Castlemaine Health offers local people living with the condition access to support and treatment without having to travel for the first time.

Occupational therapist Helen Gilbey, who heads up the lymphoedema clinic, says improving access to treatment for regional patients inspired her to begin her training.

"Many of the patients I was seeing in my role as an occupational therapist had lymphoedema. Their mobility was poor and other complications associated with the condition made travel very difficult."

"It was extremely challenging and I could see that it was a growing problem in our community."

"Lymphoedema is one of those conditions where early management is essential. When treatment and support is difficult to access the opposite can happen and this can lead to a range of avoidable and debilitating complications."

Lymphoedema occurs when the lymphatic system doesn't function properly. Sometimes the system is damaged, often as a result of some cancer treatments including the removal or radiation of lymph nodes, and other times it just hasn't formed correctly.

When the lymphatic system isn't working, fluids and proteins from the blood (lymph) build up instead of draining into the tissues and back into the blood. This causes painful swelling and inflammation, which can become fibrotic or hardened if not treated. If the fluid leaks out of the skin chronic wounds can develop.

Lymphoedema can affect any part of the body but tends to occur more com-

monly in the arms and legs.

According to Cancer Australia, conservative estimates suggest that at least 20 per cent of patients treated for melanoma, breast, gynaecological or prostate cancers will experience lymphoedema.

"The focus with treating lymphoedema is on self-management," says Helen.

"Managing weight. Managing skincare. Exercise. Even a simple action like walking helps to push fluid out."

"For many people lymphoedema starts off fairly slowly. Their legs and feet become a little bit more swollen. Perhaps they get some relief from this overnight when their legs are elevated, but eventually that stops happening."

"We would really encourage these people to speak with their GP about a management plan and a referral to our program."

Massage and compression are key elements of the treatment program. Either by applying self-massage or using an intermittent compression pump. Compression garments like stockings and socks are also used, providing a firm barrier against which the muscles in the legs push, also helping to move the fluid.

"We work to move the fluid back up towards the trunk so it can be removed through the action of the heart and the kidneys," says Castlemaine Health physiotherapist Sue Ibbs, who also treats people through the new clinic.

The clinic is also able to refer patients to other services including the new tissue care clinic.

"Chronic wounds can be a serious problem for people with lymphoedema," says Helen.

"The tissue care clinic brings together practitioners including our district and complex care nurses, dietitians and podiatrists to provide better long term management options for people in this situation."

The team has also started the lovely legs exercise group.

"People with lymphoedema can experience a high degree of social isolation,"



says Sue.

"Many of the people we see were previously quite outgoing but lymphoedema has had an enormous impact on their ability to socialise and as a result, on their mental and physical health."

"They often don't fit into a standard exercise program," she says.

"So they stay at home, don't use their muscles, and it all becomes then a vicious cycle."

The lovely legs program is a great ex-

ample of what Helen and Sue are trying to do with the lymphoedema clinic. Exercising helps move the lymph but just being with other people has a huge impact on the way people feel.

"We want people to be able to get on with their lives," says Sue.

"Lymphoedema shouldn't stop them from living."

March is lymphoedema awareness month. For information on events and programs visit www.lymphoedema.org.au

Q&A

Q: What are the symptoms of lymphoedema?

A: Lymphoedema most commonly affects the legs and arms. The area will be noticeably swollen and feel heavy and very tight. It will be hotter than the rest of the body and may ache or feel like pins and needles. You may also experience darting pains or pain in the associated joints.

Q: How does hydrotherapy help treat lymphoedema?

A: Hydrotherapy is fantastic for lymphoedema. Compression helps move the lymph. When you exercise in water, every meter doubles the pressure or compression on the body. So just walking in a pool at chest height is like being on the intermittent compression pump.



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