

**Scott Weyant MOT, OTR/L, CHT, CLT-LANA**

**Lymphedema Management and Treatment**

**What Is Lymphedema?**

[Lymphedema](/locations/hospitals/magee/services/magee-womens-cancers/lymphedema/managing-lymphedema) is a condition in which swelling (edema) occurs from abnormal accumulation of protein-rich lymph fluid in the space between cells in the body.

Swelling develops in one (or both) of your arms and legs when a blockage occurs in the lymphatic system that prevents fluid from draining well, which results in swelling. Though there is no cure for lymphedema, our UPMC rehabilitation specialists will work with you to treat and manage your lymphedema.

**What Causes Lymphedema?**

The most common cause of lymphedema is damage to or the removal of lymph nodes due to cancer. In addition to damage or removal, the causes of fluid buildup may include:

* Certain cancer medications (such as tamoxifen)
* Radiation therapy
* Obesity
* Infection
* Deficiency in the lymphatic system

**What Are the Symptoms of Lymphedema?**

Symptoms of lymphedema often include tightness of clothing, rings, or watches and a feeling of fullness around your arms and legs.

**Lymphedema Treatment Options**

There are various components to the treatment and management of lymphedema. Our highly trained therapists — many of whom are certified by the [Lymphology Association of North America](http://www.clt-lana.org/) — are experts in the treatment of lymphedema, using the **complete decongestive therapy method**.

**What is complete decongestive therapy for lymphedema?**

**Complete decongestive therapy (CDT)** for lymphedema is a comprehensive program that combines the following listed treatments for a holistic approach to treat lymphedema. Two phases of this treatment include an active phase to bring your lymphedema under control followed by a maintenance phase.

Lymphedema management typically includes

* **Manual lymph drainage:** Also known as **lymphatic massage**, manual lymph drainage is a specific, gentle technique that uses precise hand movements to increase fluid circulation throughout your body. Manual lymph drainage for lymphedema reduces swelling and pain often associated with swelling.
* **Compression bandaging:** Compression bandaging (or wrapping) is performed by a trained therapist who wraps several layers of short stretch bandages and padding around the affected limb. Bandaging reduces the size of the limb through pressure and promotes an internal pumping action that pushes fluid back into the lymphatic system and out of your tissue.
* **Exercise:** Exercise is an important component in the management of lymphedema. Under the supervision of a therapist you will gradually increase exercise for the affected limb. By slowly increasing activity, the affected limb becomes decongested and can handle greater levels of stress.
* **Self-Management:** Self-management is the overarching term that describes everything you can do to manage your lymphedema at home. Therapists teach you how to apply bandages or compression wear and specific exercises to reduce the chance of your lymphedema returning to its pre-treatment form