

COMPLEMENTARY THERAPY AND LYMPHOEDEMA

Ideally you will be helped to manage your Lymphoedema, by specially trained practitioners, therapists and doctors.

WHAT IS COMPLEMENTARY THERAPY?

These are treatments / therapies which are not necessarily scientifically based, tested or proven. They are non medical interventions which may be used alongside mainstream medical treatment and it is always advisable to talk to your doctor, nurse or lymphoedema therapist beforehand.

Sometimes the term alternative is used. This does not mean instead of conventional medical care and advice, but that the treatment is not accepted as medically effective or approved.

Some therapies claim to effectively treat specific medical conditions, or to effect the body in a particular way, but there is often no scientific evidence of this. Sometimes therapies are not based on anatomical or physiological systems, but on un-proven systems eg: 'energy channels'.

However anecdotally, many people find that certain Complementary Therapies help to ease their symptoms , alleviate stress and aid relaxation. Nowadays, many of us have visited SPA's for a treat, where various treatments are available.

The aim of this FIRST LYMPHCARE GUIDE is to help you make safe, informed choices about the suitability of other therapies and YOUR lymphoedema.

Remember though that lymphoedema, along with other medical conditions may be contraindicated for some complementary / alternative therapies. Some interventions may make your lymphoedema worse.

TIP: ALWAYS ask your Lymphoedema Specialist's advice.

Even with advice, how do you know if a treatment is safe? Or if the therapist is suitably qualified?

CHOOSING A THERAPY

Do your research! Read about the therapy.

- Do you want a 'hands on' therapy? Or would you prefer minimal contact?
- Will you need to undress?

- How long will it take?
- What are you hoping to get out of the treatment?
- What part of your body is affected by lymphoedema? Remember that from a lymph drainage point of view it is the whole 'quadrant' of the body which is at risk, not just the swollen part.
- Ask people who have tried it: What is it like? How firm is the pressure? Are oils/creams used?
- Are there contraindications?

CHOOSING A THERAPIST

When you have decided on a therapy, then you need to consider the THERAPIST.

Again be prepared to do a bit of research first.

Speak to people who have been treated by the therapist.

Speak to the therapist and ask:

- What do their Initials mean?
- Therapists often put initials after their names... sometimes these only relate to their insuring body, rather than actual qualifications.
- What is their training and qualifications? Can you look at their certificates?
- Are they insured?
- Do they know what lymphoedema is?
- Have they had additional lymphoedema training?
- Where did they train? (Vodder, Foeldii, Leduc, Casley Smith, FG MLD)
- If your weight exceeds 18st, it is advisable to mention this because all therapy couches have an upper weight limit.
- If you have mobility difficulties, it is advisable to ask about facilities.

TIP: Be guided by your instinct.

When you arrive, look around you.

- Is the place clean?
- Is the therapist and other employees professional in dress and manner?
- Do they answer your queries openly.?
- Do they take a full medical history?
- If you are still unsure, don't be afraid to say.

Remember, you are allowing someone to treat YOUR body. Never be afraid to ask.

If, during treatment, you are not happy with any aspect, ask to stop.

WHICH THERAPIES CAN I TRY?

This guide focuses on some of the more popular therapies available in the UK.

M.L.D – MANUAL LYMPHATIC DRAINAGE MASSAGE (medical)

This is a relatively light technique which uses 2 directional skin stretch techniques working specifically over the superficial lymphatic channels and Lymph nodes. It does not use oils or creams. Therapists are trained to an advanced level for treating Lymphoedema and are reassessed every 2 years. Training schools approved in the UK are: FG-MLD/LTA, VODDER, FOELDII, LEDUC, CASLEY SMITH. The British Lymphology society and each school keeps a register of members. It is based on robust knowledge of physiology and anatomy and is supported by ongoing scientific research. It is used in many Lymphoedema clinics, and also offered by some private practitioners.

TIP: Some Spas and Beauticians offer LYMPHATIC DRAINAGE.... This is not a medical treatment and is not suitable for lymphoedema.

BODY/THERAPEUTIC MASSAGE

Uses plain oils or cream and only LIGHT EFFLEURAGE to affected quadrant, avoiding affected areas.

BOWEN THERAPY

Gentle manipulations, relaxing – some deeper moves may need to be avoided on lymphoedematous areas.

REFLEXOLOGY

Firm pressures on points on the feet, hands or earlobes. Based on 'supposed' energy channels. No scientific basis, but many people find it relaxing.

LYMPH REFLEXOLOGY

A more recent adaptation which claims to specifically improve lymph drainage, but not scientifically evidenced. It may reduce oedema at the time, but is not an accepted treatment for the condition. It may be relaxing.

CRANIO-SACRAL OSTEOPATHY

Very light spinal manipulation. Can be deeply relaxing. No scientific evidence.

REIKI

Light touch or hands-off technique. No physical pressure or manipulation used. Some find it very relaxing. (No scientific basis).

INDIAN HEAD MASSAGE

Westernised sequence of massage performed as you sit or lie down. Uses oils or creams and deep pressures to upper back, shoulders, neck, head and face. Can be adapted by skilled practitioner to use light pressure only. Avoid if facial oedema. Avoid essential oils where there is lymphoedema.

FACIAL MASSAGE/ FACIALS/FACIAL SAUNAS

Avoid if you have facial oedema/sinusitis.

WHICH THERAPIES SHOULD I AVOID?

This is just a general guidance of the more commonly available treatments.

SHIATSU

Uses deep thumb pressures and strenuous manipulations of joints and tissues; may damage microlymphatics and be painful.

OSTEOPATHY / CHIROPRACTIC

Used for spinal or postural problems. Sometimes uses powerful manipulations and positioning to 're align' the spine. Some moves may compromise lymphoedematous areas.

AROMATHERAPY MASSAGE with ESSENTIAL OILS

Avoid on areas of lymphoedema. Essential oils may cause skin sensitivities, create extra 'load' for local lymphatics to transport, and may damage hosiery.

SWEDISH MASSAGE

Deep pressures used, working into muscles, this could damage micro lymphatics and be painful.

SPORTS MASSAGE

Usually performed by sports therapist or physiotherapist. Very deep manipulation, friction and massage techniques are used, to release tensions and damage to muscles, tendons, ligaments and fascia and to improve function. They may also use acupuncture. Can be painful and may make swelling worse, cause bruising or damage to microlymphatics.

ACUPUNCTURE

Based on the body's supposed energy channels (meridians), uses needles and carries an infection risk. Avoid on affected quadrant.

MOXIBUSTION

Acupuncture with needles and heat source which is an infection risk. This treatment may cause increased swelling in lymphoedema.

ACUPRESSURE

As above but uses deep thumb pressures instead of needles. Avoid on affected area.

CUPPING

Heated glass 'cups' applied to skin to increase blood flow to surface. A risk of damage to superficial lymphatics, infection and increased swelling. Causes marked bruising.

HOT STONES

Uses heated stones or shells and aromatherapy oils to massage deep tissues. Pressure and heat may make swelling worse.

REMEMBER: This is not a comprehensive list and is intended to guide you in making safe informed choices about complementary therapy.

The BEST treatment and advice is provided by your lymphoedema specialist because it is based on evidence and Internationally accepted guidance.

HOWEVER.... COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES can promote relaxation, boost self esteem and ease some of the symptoms of heaviness and discomfort of lymphoedema.

Use this advice and the ACT FIRST tips to safely choose a therapist and treatment that suits you, your needs AND your lymphoedema.

ACT FIRST

Use this every time you visit a new therapist.

Ask to see certificates

Check credentials

Tell all your medical history

Feedback if pressure is too heavy

Insist unscented oils / creams only on affected quadrant

Really light effleurage on affected quadrant

STop treatment if not happy.

MOST OF ALL..... ENJOY!

A FEW WORDS ABOUT SPAS.....

A spa day can be a wonderful way to relax and 'recharge our batteries'. It can be a very positive social experience and can help us to 'get in touch' with our bodies. But they can also be daunting places if we have lymphoedema, or are coping with long term health issues. Below are a few pointers to help you get the most out of a Spa visit.

WHAT HAPPENS ON A SPA DAY?

Usually you are greeted on arrival and shown around the facilities. You'll be given towels and a robe for the day, but it can be useful to take your own flip flops. Ask for more

towels if yours become too wet during the day: you need to minimise infection risk.

TIP: Take 2 swimming costumes. A 2 piece is useful to keep for when you have your massage. Easier to change in and out of and this ensures you are not spending the day in a wet costume!

If you have booked treatments or are choosing to do so, these will be organised to fit around your meal times.

TIP: Often spa visitors remain in their towelling robe for lunch time, but if you feel self conscious or feel you prefer to cover your swollen limb more effectively, then change into loose fitting top and leisure trousers.

TIP: If you are having a massage try to avoid straight after eating: it can feel just to uncomfortable!

Many spas offer champagne/wine on arrival or with your meal even though alcohol is usually contraindicated when having complementary therapies and if you are going to be swimming or using saunas. It's a personal choice, but if you do have alcohol, ensure that you keep well hydrated afterwards.

TIP: Remember to explain about your swelling and ask about contraindications.

Therapists will be trained in many types of massage and beauty treatments, but rarely in (medical) manual lymphatic drainage massage. They should be happy to listen to your requests regarding treatment on affected areas and be able to adapt their pressures to a lighter touch. If in doubt, choose treatments that avoid your lymphoedematous areas.

Try to avoid scented, essential oils and creams on your affected area. They may cause a skin reaction and add to the 'load' on the lymphatic system.

TIP: Wear flip flops and ensure at the end of the day that you shower and dry all areas well.

WHAT FACILITIES CAN I USE?

Remember, long periods in extremes of heat or cold can make lymphoedema worse. Try the different experiences on offer for short periods of time instead.

TIP: If you have any skin breaks cover with a sealed dressing or **DO NOT** use the wet area facilities.

SAUNAS

Rooms with dry heat. Seating at different levels, hotter at the top, cooler lower down.

STEAM ROOMS

Moist heat, sometimes with scented vapours.

JACUZZI

Warm communal ,bubble pools. Sometimes bubble jets are quite strong and may hurt tender tissues.

COLD SPA POOLS / JETS

Cold water pools, jets or showers, sometimes powerful and may hurt tender tissues.

COLD PLUNGE POOLS

Very cold water to dip in and out of.

FOOT SPAS

Communal foot baths, usually with warm water, which should drain away after each use.

SWIMMING POOLS

Indoor or outdoor. Swimming is excellent for lymphoedema.

TIP: Monitor how your lymphoedema responds to each, and stop if any problem occurs.

TIP: Ensure that you keep well hydrated during the day because of the warm environment.

AT THE END OF THE DAY:

- Shower and Dry all areas well.
- Use hairdryers provided to dry between toes.
- Use an antifungal foot powder as a preventative measure.
- Apply your hosiery.

Some Day Spas also offer relaxation, pilates or yoga sessions which can be helpful and all have quiet areas for rest.

Make sure you apply your hosiery at the end of the day.

Enjoy... and relax... and chill...

REFERENCES.

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Let's talk Lymphoedema; The essential guide to everything you need to know. MORTIMER. P AND LEVINE. G. 2017
FOR FURTHER ADVICE AND SUPPORT:

BRITISH LYMPHOLOGY SOCIETY. www.thebls.com
LYMPHOEDEMA SUPPORT NETWORK. www.lymphoedema.org
LIPOEDEMA UK. www.lipoedema.co.uk

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