

# Lymph and Lymphatic Drainage

## Definition and Benefits

Lymph is a clear fluid that circulates in the body in close connection with, but separated from, the blood circulation. It is one of our cleansing and detoxifying systems. There are basic differences between lymph and blood.

Blood is red; lymph is colourless under normal conditions.

Blood circulation is a two way closed circuit energized or pumped by the heart. Lymph is carried in a one-way system, rather like a river in reverse motion from the tissues to the core or central station near the heart. It has its own veins or collectors and only at the very end of its journey joins up with the venous circulation. The heart, respiration and body movements indirectly energize it.

On its way back, from the tissues, it passes through groups of ganglions where it is purified of waste products of metabolism, toxins and infection. One of the most important functions of the ganglions is to protect us from infection and other forms of aggression. They can also rapidly increase the quantity of lymph should it be required.

The ganglions are situated in strategic regions of the body, i.e. in the armpits, the crook of the elbow, the groin and by the side of the neck to mention a few. Each is the size of a grain of rice and cannot usually be felt but when the part of the body that they serve is under aggression, they become swollen and painful as, for example, in mumps. They are working overtime to fight against and act as a barrier to the aggressor.

Cancer cells are an aggression and when they are present, the ganglions serving the region in which they inhabit may become active and may be felt as painful swellings. This is a symptom that should never be ignored. In some cases a malignant tumour may be removed surgically along with one or several ganglions. These are ganglions that have lost the battle and have themselves become malignant. When ganglions are removed, those remaining have to work harder to clear fluid. This can sometimes result in swelling of a limb as in the arm after a lumpectomy or mastectomy.

The physiotherapist who practises Lymphatic Drainage has learned a gentle, rhythmic massage technique, which stimulates the remaining ganglions to be more performant, and recruits ganglions in adjacent regions to take over some of the workload. He or she will also, by the same technique, help the lymphatic 'river' to contour the operation sight and find an easier pathway to its final destination. This is not achieved in one treatment and the patient is required to attend regular sessions of physiotherapy for some time post-operatively.

Patients are usually delighted to comply as Lymphatic Drainage is a very pleasant and relaxing technique. The patient will also be instructed on how to live with a limb which is missing some ganglions, to be very careful of infection and overuse and will be taught an appropriate gentle exercise program.

The sooner the treatment begins the better, so when the oncologist in charge of the case thinks that the patient is ready he may prescribe the treatment before swelling in the limb has a chance to develop. He may also stop the treatment during its course to continue at a later date.

If a doctor does not prescribe this treatment, he certainly has good reasons. The patient should feel free to broach the subject of Lymphatic Drainage and discuss the matter with him or her.

Lymphatic Drainage is not a miracle cure for oedema but a gentle way of assisting nature to clear a blockage. It may have to be combined with other treatments.