Treatment of lymphoedema
surgical and conservative approaches

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What is lymphoedema?

International Societie de Lymphologue (ISL) define lymphoedema as:
The inability of the Lymphatics to keep up with the Normal demands of tissue Homeostasis, resulting in the accumulation of:

*protein rich fluid in the interstitial spaces of affected tissues*

It is a chronic progressive condition, that may occur as a primary condition or secondary to disease.
How is lymphatic fluid formed?
Note

A poster of the lymphatic system is available from medi UK.
Please call for further details.
Stages of lymphoedema (ISL staging)

Stage 1 easy to pit, may reduce overnight

Stage 2 firm, non pitting leg still a ‘leg’ shape
Stage 3

**elephantiasis stage**

Skin loses its elasticity
Underlying tissues become firm, hard to pit and very ‘woody’
Patient may have bursting sensation or pain in leg due to the volume of oedema
Mobility becomes problematic
How is lymphoedema treated?

Surgical options

Debulking (outdated due to the trauma to the limb and complexities of living with a disfigured limb)
(known as the Thompsons procedure or Charles procedure)

Leaves the limb in a very complex state
Aesthetically unappealing
Complex to maintain in compression
Foot will never reduce in size making shoes problematic
LVA

Lymphovenous anastomosis: connecting lymph vessel to a vein thereby bypassing any ‘blockage’

lymph node transfer

A relatively new procedure in this country. Transferring a lymph node to a congested area of a limb defined on MRI where the vessels will grow and help to move fluid

Suitable for a small % of the population only
Liposuction for lymphoedema/ lipoedema

Surgery to remove the fat layer.

Instant change can be seen.

Patients have to wear flat knit compression 23 hours a day for life after this procedure.

Suitable for a small % of the population.
Summary of surgical options:

- The primary treatment for lymphoedema remains conservative (decongestive) therapy.
- Surgery offers promising results but should always complement a lymphoedema service.
- Surgery for lymphoedema requires a robust multi-disciplinary approach to care.
- Therapists play a vital role in managing and supporting patients expectations.
- We need robust randomised controlled trials before the role of surgery can be firmly secured within the management of lymphoedema.
Conservative treatment for lymphoedema

- Skin care
- Exercise
- MLD
- Compression
- Healthy lifestyle

Psychological support
Conservative treatment

Decongestive Lymphatic Therapy (DLT)

Aim:
- Reduce the excess limb volume
- Reshape the limb

Action:
- Daily compression (bandaging or similar)
- Skin care
- Exercise/movement
- Manual Lymphatic Drainage

maintenance

Aim:
- Maintain improved limb shape/size
- Prevent rebound

Action:
- Daily use of compression garments (or juxta)
- Skin care
- Exercise/movement
- Simple lymph drainage
- Self management and awareness
Mishaps with bandaging techniques
Who needs DLT?

Standards of Care (BLS 2013)
- Group 1 at risk
- Group 2 mild/moderate
- Group 3 moderate/severe/complex
- Group 4 palliative
Chronic oedema due to compartment syndrome

• Not possible to do a doppler reading
• painful due to the stretch receptors in the skin being squashed
• Drop foot
• Had to stop work due to the discomfort and mobility problems, no longer able to wear shoes
After only 10 days of juxtafit

63% to 13% excess limb volume
Total Volumes of limb and weight of patient
Compression garments

Flat knit

Round knit
Juxta devices for lymphoedema

Inelastic instantly readjustable velcro devices
Juxta fit for leg
Juxta arm
Skin care

Aims
To keep skin hydrated and intact
To reduce risk of cellulitis

Daily regime including:
Washing drying and use of appropriate emollients
Observation of the affected limb and adjacent trunk
Skin care with UCS for 10 days to remove hyperkeratosis
Reduction of limb volume achieved with conservative treatment only
Conclusion

- Conservative treatment is the mainstay of treatment for lymphoedema / chronic oedema
- Empowering the patient to be part of their own care
- Finding a suitable compression device for them that is comfortable