

Self-bandaging— a tool for taking charge

By Pamela Hodgson

Q What is self-bandaging?

Those diagnosed with chronic lymphedema soon discover that learning to manage their condition themselves is the key to successful treatment. Careful attention to skin care, consistent wearing of well-fitted compression garments, exercise, and lymphatic drainage all play a role.

At the start of decongestive lymphatic therapy, compression bandages are applied by lymphedema therapists to reduce swelling. To be effective, bandages must be re-applied every 24 to 48 hours. Because of possible weekends and days when no therapy is provided, therapists will often teach their clients how to apply the bandages safely and successfully themselves. Simply put, self-bandaging is an acquired ability to apply effective bandages oneself, or with the help of a family member or friend.

Q How is self-bandaging used?

Self-bandaging enables people with lymphedema to take charge and control their condition themselves. It is used initially in the intensive treatment phase, when patients are not able to see their therapists as frequently as necessary for re-application of compression bandages. Under the guidance of a therapist, patients and interested family members or friends are taught how to apply bandages safely.

Once mastered, self-bandaging is a

life-long skill that can be used during the maintenance phase at night as a means to control occasional increases in swelling. If a flare-up occurs and patients are unable to see their therapist immediately, and they have been taught self-bandaging, they have an advantage: they can bandage themselves. Before new compression garments are ordered, self-bandaging can be used to reduce swelling. Once the effect of bandaging shows stability (as monitored by a week or so of consistent measurements taken by the patient), garments can be ordered. Of course, bandaging must be continued until the new garment's arrival.

Q Who is a good candidate?


Not everyone is capable of self-bandaging. Those with lower limb lymphedema, for instance, must have enough flexibility and dexterity to reach their feet. Those with upper limb lymphedema often believe that it is impossible to apply bandages themselves using their non-dominant hand. Happily, this is not the case at all: the non-dominant hand can definitely be used to apply bandages effectively to the dominant arm. What is needed is a good teacher, determination on the part of the client, and then practice. For those who want to learn to bandage themselves but lack

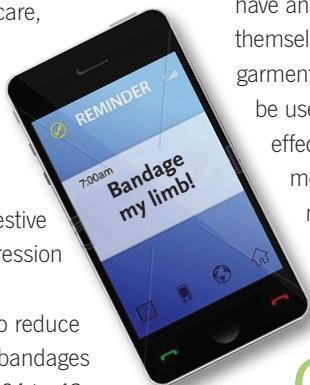
the required dexterity, flexibility or strength, a dedicated family member or friend can be taught the bandaging techniques. It is always important to learn from a qualified lymphedema therapist, to return for check-ups and review of techniques, and to seek advice from a therapist if any questions or unwanted consequences arise.

Q Why is self-bandaging important?

Chronic lymphedema is a life-long condition that requires regular, careful attention. Recurring treatment costs may prevent some patients from accessing the therapy that they need. Studies have shown that without appropriate treatment, those with lymphedema are twice as vulnerable as others to complications that require hospital services. Compression is the key element of successful therapy. Sometimes a compression garment is not sufficient and compression bandaging at night is also required. Self-bandaging is a tool

that patients themselves can use whenever they need to, at a reasonably low cost.

In the case of any chronic disease, patient self-management is crucial to long-term positive outcomes. Educating patients about risk reduction practices and encouraging them to exercise is part of standard care. Teaching self-bandaging and self-measuring should be included in this education. A final major benefit is that patients who practise self-bandaging declare that it makes them feel more independent and bolsters their confidence. They feel reassured that they can look after themselves and take charge of their lymphedema. For patients, this additional self-confidence is considered an important gain. 



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Pamela Hodgson, RMT, MSc. works as a research associate and lymphedema therapist at the Lymphedema Support Centre of the Quebec Breast Cancer Foundation and the McGill Lymphedema Research Program (Montreal, Quebec). She is an active member of the Canadian Lymphedema Framework.