

A Panel of Experts answer your lymphedema questions

A snap shot from the 2015 National Lymphedema Conference

By Dr. Moffatt, Dr. Towers, Dr. Granzow and Dr. McNeely



Q For someone living with lymphedema—do you recommend wearing gloves during all food preparation (e.g. handling raw meat, raw egg mixtures etc.) or just hand washing after?

Moffatt: I think hand washing is probably absolutely fine, especially when you consider that medical practice revolves around meticulous hand washing. One thing I would say... avoid cutting your fingers with the knife!

Q Are there any medications that might increase lymphedema swelling temporarily (antihistamines, combination cold medicines)?

Moffatt: Yes, lots of medications, particularly antihypertensive medicines and drugs like calcium channel blockers have a 60% rate of swelling when you start. Corticosteroids, which may be prescribed for a number of conditions can do two things: sometimes they increase swelling, but sometimes, paradoxically, we use them to treat patients who have particularly aggressive lymphedema due to recurrent cancer and swelling can go down. Drugs for epilepsy as well. In fact, if you look at the Drug Codex that we did in the UK, most drugs report that you will have edema occasionally occurring. That said, there are the main groups: corticosteroids, non-steroidals and anti-hypertensives that are the ones that are the big ones for affecting edema.



Q We have been told that day garments should not be worn at night due to “nocturnal dip” (a drop in blood pressure and skin resistance) that can lead to tissue damage. Better to use night garments...is that true?

Moffatt: I'm not sure there is any evidence of that at all. I think that when you're thinking of any sort of compression, your main concern is to make sure you have good arterial flow. To be honest, when you go to bed at night the only thing you're affecting is gravity, so I think as long as that garment is not a very high level compression I see no issues about safety. It's often the case that patients cannot tolerate a higher-pressure garment at night-time.

In fact, some of my patients wear higher-pressure garments all the time, so I'm not sure that there's any harm in that at all.

Towers: I think it is basically a matter of need and comfort.

Granzow: We find that the flat-knit garments can be worn day and night, with no problem at all. It seems that people have more problems with the round knit.

Towers: Correct, you don't want a circular knit garment on your leg at night, but flat-knit is fine.

McNeely: The problem with daytime garments, especially the circular knit garments, is that they can bunch and roll down. If this happens at night, the rolling may cause a tourniquet effect on the limb and occlude

vessel flow. This may impede lymph flow out of the limb causing increased swelling and, if really tight, can compromise arterial flow (and the limb will start to ache). The bunching may cause skin irritation and breakdown at the joint. Most people will wake up due to discomfort, and adjust or remove the garment. Where I have seen problems is with cancer survivors who are taking sleep aids. Those who may fall asleep by chance with the garment on and sleep so deeply that they do not realize there is an issue with the garment.

The garments are designed for daytime wear. Seeing problems develop secondary to wearing the garment at night reinforces to me the importance of why the garments should not be worn overnight.

Q Has anyone looked into incorporating essential oils into lymphedema treatment, as most oils are anti-bacterial or anti-fungal?

Moffatt: I think there is some evidence from places like India where this type of treatment for lymphedema is actually happening. There is growing evidence around Tea Tree Oil as an antiseptic. In terms of essential oils, the trouble we have with answering all of these questions is: what are we trying to show in using them? Essential oils are used for lots of reasons, but are we trying to show that they will improve skin conditions, or that they will relax the patient? An important thing to mention however is that certainly not all oils are safe. Some oils can be quite irritating to the skin. Another thing to worry and be careful about would be allergic reactions. **LP**

Panel of Experts was a popular session featured at the National Lymphedema Conference in Calgary, Alberta in the fall of 2015. The above questions and answers are just a selection from the transcribed session and featured Dr. Christine Moffatt (England), Dr. Anna Towers (Quebec), Dr. Jay Granzow (California) and Dr. Margie McNeely (Alberta).