

Summer Living with Lymphedema

By Janice Yurick

Q I am planning a summer trip overseas. As I have lymphedema in my arm, do you have any travel tips for me?

A Well controlled lymphedema relies on routine maintenance. This likely includes wearing a well fitting compression garment, skin care, and practicing lymphedema risk reduction strategies. Other parts of routine maintenance may include: self massage, night time compression, and regular exercise. You will need to continue this maintenance regime while you travel. Additionally, there are a few extra things to



consider when traveling and flying. Many people experience some degree of limb swelling from air travel due to the reduced air pressure within the cabin of the plane. When you have lymphedema it is even more important to use compression to prevent an increase in your swelling. Be sure to wear your compression garments before, during and after the flight for several hours. While on the plane, try to spend time with your arm and hand elevated by propping your arm up on a pillow or two.

Additionally, you can encourage lymphovenous circulation with some simple exercise. For example—open and close your hand 10 times, turn your wrist in a circle five times each direction, bend and straighten your elbow 10 times. Repeat these exercises every hour.

Along with air travel comes managing one's luggage. While paced exercise may indeed help lymphedema, overuse injuries and strains cause an inflammatory response which results in an increase in fluid load. Try to avoid carrying a heavy bag on the side of your lymphedema. Luggage with wheels or backpacks with good waist supports are your best choices.

Lymphedema patients must always use risk reduction strategies to minimize their risk of infection. Your skin is the best defense against infection-causing germs entering your body. Keeping your skin clean, well-moistured and intact will go a long way to minimizing your risk of developing an infection. Sometimes accessing healthcare in a foreign country is difficult. If you have had infection(s) in the past in your lymphedematous limb, you may want to talk to your doctor about taking an antibiotic prescription with you to use on your trip should an infection occur.

Finally, a fun tip. Summer clothing may reveal more of your compression garments than usual. Compression garments are now available in a wide range of fabric colors and patterns. Ask your vendor about your many options.



Janice Yurick PT, works at the Cross Cancer Institute in Edmonton, Alberta as the Senior Physiotherapist and Coordinator, Department of Rehabilitation Medicine. She is also an active member of the CLF Advisory Board, Pathways Editorial Board and CLF Education Working Group.

Q I wear a thigh-high stocking for leg lymphedema. Do you have any suggestions for how to manage in the summer heat?

A Compression stockings can be hot at the best of times let alone during the hot summer months. You may not tolerate wearing a thigh-high stocking all summer long. Depending where the most problematic area is in your leg, you may be able to get away with wearing compression over a smaller area. For example, if your swelling is worse in the bottom part of the leg perhaps a knee high stocking would suffice; or if it is worse at the top of the leg, try lycra cycling shorts. Depending on how quickly your swelling accumulates once you remove your compression stocking, you may manage with no garment during the day if you use some form of compression at night such as multi-layered bandaging or a night time compression system. When outdoors in the hot weather, try misting your stocking with water to help to keep you cooler. Take steps to protect your skin with sunscreen or light clothing. Insect bites can cause inflammation which may increase your swelling or lead to an infection—use insect repellent when appropriate.

An excellent place to be active in the summer and avoid overheating is the water. Water exerts pressure in the same way that your stocking does. In fact, aquatherapy has been shown to benefit lymphedema patients. You do not need to be a swimmer, simply walk in different ways—forward, backward and sideways.

Lymphedema is a chronic condition—it is worth investing time to find the best way to manage your lymphedema so you can fully enjoy the summer. **LP**

