

Fitting Compression into Your Lifestyle

By DeCourcy Squire

Q Can I ever take a reprieve from wearing compression, i.e., for an important event like a wedding?

A Lymphedema is a chronic disease requiring life time management. Finding a way to make it fit into your life may mean leaving your sleeve off for a family wedding and then ensuring you wear your night compression later that night. The occasional omission of a garment for a social event does not cause significant harm. Likely if there is a subsequent increase in swelling, it will reduce with a few days of diligent management following the event.



However, it is important for you to know how to monitor the limb and know what to do if it gets worse. How well your limb tolerates being out of compression depends on a number of factors including how well controlled the swelling is in general; what you do while you are out of the compression; and how long you



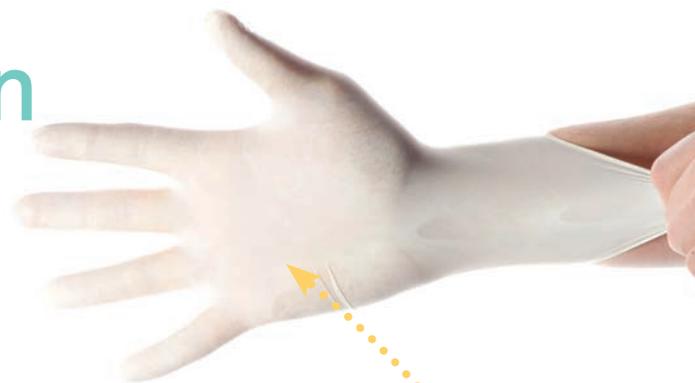
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stay out of compression. It is preferable to wait until your limb size has been stable for at least six months before you start testing how long it can tolerate being without compression.

Even the most conscientious person is out of compression occasionally to bathe and to change between day and night compression. Do some trial runs without compression, starting with an hour at a time. Measure your limb before and after this hour. If your limb size stays stable, the next time try for a longer period, continuing to monitor and track any changes.

If at any time your limb starts feeling heavy, tired, achy, or warm, immediately put compression back on and elevate your limb on pillows above the level of your heart—those are symptoms that your lymphatic system is becoming overloaded. Note what kind of activities bring on the symptoms of overload when you are out of compression. If your limb does not get overloaded or increase in size, gradually work up to the amount of time you think you will be out of compression for the event.

On the day: take your compression garment with you. As much as possible, avoid any of the activities that cause your limb to get overloaded, such as keeping the limb in a static dependent position or getting overheated. Be sure that your clothes are nonbinding. Stay well hydrated. You could always put your compression garments back on if you notice increased swelling.



If your limb becomes more swollen in spite of your preparation, be extra conscientious in your home program for the next week. A one-time increase, dealt with quickly, should subside quickly, if controlled again with compression.

Q I am a breast cancer patient who has developed lymphedema in my left arm (and chest area). I am also a RPN and in the process of trying to go back to work. I wear a compression sleeve and gauntlet. Presently the hospital will not allow me to return wearing the garment for infection control issues. They are suggesting not wearing the gauntlet while at work and would prefer that I don't wear either garment. I am concerned that this might increase the chance of more swelling in my hand. What are your views on wearing a sleeve only? Should the gauntlet always be worn with the sleeve?

A It is important to wear your gauntlet, especially when you are using your hand a lot. Your concern is correct: wearing only the sleeve puts your hand at risk for swelling. A potential solution: while at work, wear a surgical glove over your hand so that your gauntlet does not come into contact with patients. If you need your fingers free for better sensitivity/dexterity in what you are doing, you can cut the finger tips off the glove. In between patients, wash your hands and change the surgical glove. This way you can continue to wear your medically necessary compression, and hopefully satisfy the infection control issues at your hospital. **LP**