

What is Lipoedema?

First described by Allen & Hines, Lipoedema is a chronic condition that presents as symmetrical accumulation of fat in the subcutaneous tissue with almost exclusive occurrence in women'. Thighs, hips, buttocks, lower legs and sometimes the arms are most commonly affected with, considerable tissue enlargement that may lead to pain, reduced mobility and impaired psychosocial wellbeing.

Clinical Features of Lipoedema

Lipoedema is commonly mistaken as lymphoedema – especially in later stages - but there are often clear distinctions between the two conditions

Differences Between Lipoedema & Lymphoedema

Lipoedema	Lymphoedema
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A symmetrical swelling with fat deposits, usually affecting the lower limbs• The Stemmer's sign is negative• There is often shape disproportion (small torso; large hips/legs)• Feet/hands are never affected• Pitting of the skin is not present• Risk of cellulitis in the affected areas is no greater than normal• The affected skin is usually soft with loose, floppy connective tissues. There is no skin thickening• Affects females almost exclusively• Does not respond to overall weight loss• Tissues are painful to palpation and bruise easily	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Swelling affects one or both limbs which may be unequal on each side if the body• The Stemmer's sign is generally positive• Feet are frequently affected• Pitting of the skin may be present – especially in the early stages of the condition• Increased risk of cellulitis in affected areas• The affected skin and subcutaneous tissues are often thickened and fibrous• Can affect males and females• Losing weight usually has a beneficial effect on the swelling• Tissues are generally not painful and do not have a tendency to bruise easily

Principals of Lipoedema Management

Lipoedema is a chronic, long term condition, requiring a holistic, multi-disciplinary team approach which should include individualised care plans according to need and person centred treatment goals including:

- Management of symptoms including pain, impaired mobility, swelling, oedema and psychosocial issues
- Facilitating, encouraging, and enhancing the patient's ability to self-care. This will include education, and a healthy life style such as appropriate exercise and weight management
- Optimising health and prevention of disease progression

Components of Lipoedema Management

The following components of care need to be tailored to the individual patient need – taking into account the severity of symptoms and the degree and complexity of tissue enlargement (and whether there is a secondary lymphoedema complicating the condition) as well as the psychological impact.

These will include:

- Psychosocial support and the management of expectations
- Healthy eating and weight management
- Exercise and ways to improve physical activity
- Compression therapy (in all its guises)
- Skin care and protection

Education and advice around the disease and its possible progression will be paramount within the treatment framework as will patient centred care and the need to take control of their own condition

The Role of Surgery

Liposuction may help restore functionality, lesson hypersensitivity (pain) and swelling, improve physical appearance and thereby the quality of life

The recommended type of liposuction is ‘Tumescent’ – using local analgesia and vibrating cannulas – and surgeons with an empathy for the lymphatic system
Multiple sessions are often necessary to adequately treat extremities circumferentially along the entire length

A healthy lifestyle should be maintained afterwards

Compression therapy is advised for at least 6months post operatively

However - it is not a cure – and it is not an option for many as it is unavailable on the NHS

If lipoedema and obesity co-exist then bariatric surgery maybe the first line option

LipoedemaUK

Many patients and HCP’s have found help from this national charity. Goals of the charity include:

- To raise awareness of the disease within the medical profession throughout the UK
- Achieve early diagnosis so women get the help and treatment they require
- Encourage new research into treatments, which ultimately find a cure

They have been pivotal in improving the awareness of the condition – not least through an eLearning module for GP’s and HCP’s through the RCGP’s ([accessed through the RCGP website](#)) and by facilitating the Best Practice Guidelines (these maybe [downloaded from WoundsUK](#))