

National Lymphoedema Partnership

Consensus Statement on the Chronic Oedema –Lymphoedema Interface

Chronic Oedema - Definition

Chronic oedema is a term used to describe a group of conditions characterised by the presence of swelling within tissues of the body, caused by the accumulation of excess fluid within the interstitial space of the affected area. Oedema most commonly affects the lower or upper limbs, but may also affect midline structures such as the head and neck, trunk, breasts or genitalia.

Use of the terms Chronic Oedema and Lymphoedema

‘Chronic Oedema’ is often used interchangeably with the term **‘Lymphoedema’**. Oedema results from an imbalance between capillary filtration into and lymphatic drainage from the interstitial space. Although the term ‘lymphoedema’ suggests that the oedema is caused by a lymphatic abnormality, in every case of chronic oedema there will be some impairment of lymphatic drainage, either through an underlying abnormality (‘primary’ or ‘secondary’) or through ‘lymphatic failure’ as a result of the capacity of the lymphatics being overloaded. The degree to which the lymphatics are, or become affected may influence the clinical presentation of the oedema, the subcutaneous tissues and skin. Where there is an impairment of lymphatic drainage, over time, the fluid component of oedema may become replaced by fibrosis and/or adipose tissue.

Time frame

The term ‘Chronic’ is traditionally used to describe oedema that has been persistent for at least 3 months to distinguish these conditions from more acute causes of oedema eg post-operative oedema, heart failure. However even with acute causes there may be an impact on the lymphatic system that then predisposes to a more chronic condition. In other situations the clinical picture may indicate that long term management will be needed even within the first 3 months after presentation. The term ‘chronic’ should therefore not be seen as restrictive.

Patients at risk of chronic oedema / lymphoedema

In some recognised situations, (eg after some cancer treatments, post deep vein thrombosis, obesity, severe immobility) an impairment of the lymphatic system may be present even before the outward signs of oedema are observable or measurable. In these situations, the affected person is at risk of developing oedema and risk reduction strategies may prevent or delay the onset of symptoms or signs.

Other conditions

Though not strictly ‘oedema’ (ie an accumulation of interstitial fluid), other conditions (eg lipoedema) that cause swelling of the limbs, can, in themselves lead to longer term lymphatic changes and are therefore usefully included in the group of ‘chronic oedemas’ from the perspective of assessment and management.

The National Lymphoedema Partnership is a multi-stakeholder group encompassing clinical, educational and research experts from various professional groups and people with lymphoedema. It was established in 2014.