

Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) for lipoedema

What is manual lymphatic drainage?

A gentle but very specific type of massage that improves the transport of fluid and waste in the body through the lymphatic system. The lymphatic system drains excess fluid and waste products from the tissues, deals with inflammation and infection, and transports fats around the body. A manual lymphatic drainage therapist uses light and rhythmic hand movements on the skin, stimulating lymph nodes and the numerous lymphatic channels. Usually, MLD also incorporates breathing movements.

What are the benefits of Lymphatic Drainage?

- **Helps with Healing**

After Surgery or receiving an injury, the tissue around the site of an injury or surgery may become swollen and sore. Manual Lymphatic Drainage boosts lymph flow, reducing localised swelling and encouraging blood flow, which brings oxygen to the site and lessens wound healing time.

- **Improved Results after Liposuction**

Frequently recommended by surgeons during recovery from Liposuction. MLD decreases recovery time and improves results by reducing scar tissue formation and lessening post-surgery swelling.

- **Reduces Swelling**

After periods of inactivity or lessened mobility, fluid tends to accumulate in tissue making them tender and swollen. MLD helps the body remove some of this fluid(Lymph) from the cells, reducing swelling and tenderness.

- **Eases stress and boost relaxation**

The gentle, light gestures on the skin increase lymph flow creating a feeling of relaxation and wellbeing.

How often should I have manual lymphatic drainage?

This will depend on your individual situation. Having a regular course of MLD may be more effective than a one-off treatment. Sometimes MLD is used several times a week, with



treatments such as compression garments or bandages, to reduce swelling. In lipoedema, MLD may be effective as a weekly or monthly treatment, to help manage symptoms such as heaviness and pain.

What effects might Manual Lymphatic Drainage have on lipoedema?

In someone with lipoedema, the lymphatics may not effectively drain the enlarged areas of fat tissue, so fluid accumulates, leading to inflammation and more swelling. MLD can help to reduce the fluid and inflammation, reducing heaviness, swelling and discomfort. Your skin might feel less tight, and your limbs feel lighter. You may notice that your sleep has improved.

MLD also affects the nervous system (nerves and brain), relaxing you and relieving pain. Some people say they find the treatment makes them very tired, and others feel energised. As it helps the body to remove fluid, MLD can make you pass more urine. MLD to the 'tummy' area can help with bowel health and constipation.

Where do I find a reputable MLD practitioner?

Some NHS lymphoedema clinics will see people with lipoedema and provide MLD. This depends on local services, and many have limited resources.

In the UK, you can find lists of NHS services and independent MLD therapists. You could check this website for qualified practitioners: <https://www.mlduk.org.uk/therapists/>

Always check the qualifications of the therapist as some sports and massage schools teach lymphatic drainage techniques that are quite heavy. These are not always suitable for a compromised lymphatic system or someone with lipoedema who bruises easily. It takes several months to qualify in MLD, so therapists have had a rigorous training schedule and are expected to update every two years.

What might I expect if I go for MLD?

An MLD therapist will start by asking questions about your situation, your medical history and symptoms. If suitable, you may start the treatment that day. If they need to contact your doctor (for example, if you have complex medical problems), treatment may be delayed.

Treatments commonly take about one hour. The MLD therapist will usually ask you to lie on a treatment couch, but treatment can sometimes be done in a chair. The treatment is directly onto the skin, without any oils or creams, so you may need to remove clothing. You will be well covered with towels or blankets to ensure your privacy and comfort.



It can feel like a big step to take your clothes off and allow a virtual stranger to touch your skin. Remember that MLD therapists work on people of all shapes and sizes. Their aim is to work with you and to support you. You should feel that you can talk to the MLD therapist and feel comfortable in their hands. If you want to start gradually by keeping your clothes on, tell the therapist, so they can adapt the treatment.

Treatment often starts with breathing exercises to help the deep lymph drainage. Commonly the neck is then treated, followed by the central body such as the abdomen or back, before the legs or arms. This allows space for fluid to drain from your extremities. Any part of the body can be treated including face, legs and buttocks. You will feel the treatment gently moving your skin but it should not cause undue redness.

How much does MLD cost if I go to a non-NHS therapist?

This will vary according to your location, and the background of the therapist. Commonly the cost is around £40-70 per session, but can be over £100 if you are in areas such as London. Check costs before you start and ask if they will offer a reduced rate for a series of treatment sessions.

What self-treatment can I do?

Any self-care such as regular moisturising and protecting your skin from damage is important to ensuring your lymphatics are healthy. Exercises such as swimming, walking, stretching and Pilates are also effective in improving lymphatic drainage. Wearing compression garments before and after MLD can be important. Some people learn to do self-massage or skin brushing. This can be easier if you have MLD treatment first so you know what it should feel like. See the factsheet for more details (*link to SLD and skin brushing leaflet*).