

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 and deals with inflammation and infection. It also absorbs fats from the digestive system and moves them 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 manual lymphatic drainage?

- **Reduces swelling**
MLD helps give a 'boost' to the lymphatic system, to remove fluid from the tissues, and reduce swelling, tenderness and pain.
- **Helps with healing**
The tissue around an injury, wound, or after surgery may become swollen and sore due to inflammation. Manual lymphatic drainage helps to reduce localised swelling and remove waste from the site, ensuring faster healing of injuries and wounds. MLD can also improve the feel and appearance of scars, reducing tightness, and discolouration.
- **Improves movement**
When pain and swelling are reduced, you feel more able to move. An MLD therapist can also use various techniques to improve joint movement.
- **Eases stress and boosts relaxation**
The gentle, rhythmic movements stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, creating a feeling of relaxation and wellbeing. It can also help to improve sleep.

How often should I have manual lymphatic drainage (MLD)?

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. Talk with your therapist for more specific information.

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. This leads to inflammation and more swelling. MLD can help to reduce the fluid and inflammation, improving symptoms such as heaviness, swelling and discomfort. Your skin might feel less tight, and your limbs feel lighter. You may notice that your sleep has improved.

MLD 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 also improves bowel health and can alleviate 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 clinics have limited resources.

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

Always check the qualifications of the MLD therapist as some sports and massage schools teach lymphatic drainage techniques that are not suitable for a compromised lymphatic system or someone with lipoedema who bruises easily. Look for the following MLD training school qualifications including: Vodder, Foëldi, Casley-Smith, and Fluroscopy-guided MLD. It takes several months to qualify in MLD, so therapists have had a rigorous training schedule.

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 the therapist prefers 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. Some therapists will also treat you on your bed or in a chair if you are unable to get comfortable on a couch. The treatment is directly onto the skin, without any oils or creams, so you may need to remove some clothing. You will be well covered with towels or blankets to ensure your privacy and comfort.

It can feel like a very big step to take your clothes off and allow a virtual stranger to touch your skin. It is important to remember that NHS practitioners and MLD therapists are very

accepting and 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 the 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 in some city areas. 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 also be important. Some people learn to do self-MLD or skin-brushing. This can be easier if you have MLD treatment first so you know what it should feel like. See our factsheet for more details on self-lymphatic drainage and skin brushing.

References

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