

Say So Long to Swelling: What You Need to Know about Leg Edema

Healthy Conversations A YRMC HealthConnect Livestream Presentation

10 Facts About Leg Edema from Dr. Kumar



1. All that “swells” is not fluid. It may be fat, fibrosis or scar tissue. Take the thumb test to find out. Press your thumb against a bone for 10 seconds. If it makes a dent, the swelling is due to fluid. By the way, it’s normal to have extra fat around the ankle joint.
2. The most common cause of leg edema is venous insufficiency. Less frequent causes are medication-induced edema, lymphedema, liver cirrhosis, chronic kidney disease and protein-losing enteropathy. Leg edema is five times more common than heart failure. Lymphedema is most often caused by venous insufficiency. Other causes include cancer, trauma and surgery.
3. If your leg swells quickly overnight, it may be due to a blood clot in a deep vein. This is an emergency that should be treated immediately.
4. Leg edema needs to be detected and treated early for the best results. Early diagnosis can prevent chronic venous insufficiency and permanent skin changes like stasis dermatitis, venous eczema, recurrent cellulitis and venous ulcers.
5. Water pills (diuretics) are not the answer for most people with leg edema. These medications may cause kidney damage, especially in older adults. Water pills can also trigger refractory edema (persistent swelling that doesn’t respond to diuretics and sodium restriction).
6. Calcium channel blockers (CCBs) cause the precapillary vessels to dilate, which can lead to leg edema. Up to 25% of patients on 10 mg of the CCB amlodipine experience this. The best treatment is to stop taking the CCB. Another option is to use an angiotensin receptor blocker as it causes post capillary dilatation and can improve the situation. Also, diuretics in this situation can be harmful.
Not everyone who takes CCBs develops edema. If your leg edema didn’t start or get worse when you began taking CCBs, discontinuing the medication won’t improve your edema.
7. Chronic edema often progresses to skin changes such as stasis dermatitis, venous eczema, ulcers and secondary lymphedema. These conditions can have a profound physical and psychological impact.
8. Chronic leg edema can affect a person’s day-to-day activities and mobility. It can eventually be disabling and lead to depression.
9. Some people experience chronic leg edema in one leg, but not the other. Most often, this is caused by varicose veins that are worse in one leg. Lymphedema can be another reason for this. However, iliac vein stenosis/compression may be responsible and should be investigated.
10. In the late stages, chronic leg edema is a complex condition. Treating it effectively requires a team of trained specialists.

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