What is Complex Decongestive Therapy?

If you have been diagnosed as having lymphoedema your physiotherapist may suggest commencing a course of Complex Decongestive Therapy to help manage your symptoms. Complex Decongestive Therapy or CDT is a treatment option which combines Manual Lymphatic Drainage with Multi Layer Lymphatic Bandaging. It can also be known as Decongestive Lymphatic Therapy or DLT.

What is Manual Lymphatic Drainage?

Manual Lymphatic Drainage or MLD is a specialised form of massage, which should only be carried out by a trained therapist to move the skin in specific directions based on the underlying anatomy and physiology of the lymphatic system. Through these techniques the therapist can stimulate increased lymphatic filtration at the healthy lymph nodes and guide lymph from swollen areas to these nodes.

Important to know about Manual Lymphatic Drainage

- MLD should only be performed by a qualified Lymphoedema therapist.
- MLD is a very light massage and should not cause any discomfort or skin irritation.
- For best results the massage should be performed directly on skin so you will be asked to remove some clothing. If you feel uncomfortable with this, please speak to your therapist to discuss how best to perform the massage.
- For best results your therapist may ask you to lie flat on your back and on your front during the massage. If you find these positions uncomfortable please discuss with your therapist so alternative treatment positions can be used.
- It is very important to make your therapist aware of any new medical issues that may arise if you are attending for a course of MLD.
- Remember it may take a few sessions before you notice an improvement in your swelling. It is important to set goals with your therapist before commencing a course.
What is Multi Layer Lymphatic Bandaging?

Multi Layer Lymphatic Bandaging or MLLB is a multi – layer system of bandages which provides compression for the muscles to work against and therefore pump swelling to the healthy lymph nodes where it will be filtered out of the system. Traditionally MLLB was used for more severe swelling. Recent research suggests it can be used effectively in less severe swelling to maximise the effects of MLD.

Important to know about Multi Layer Lymphatic Bandaging

- Numerous layers of bandages are required to achieve the desired compression levels. For this reason it is important to wear loose fitting clothing when you attend for MLLB
- It is also important to consider having a friend or family member assist with transport from the clinic after the bandages have been applied.
- Your therapist will advise you how long you need to leave the bandages on for.
- The bandages will feel bulky and restrictive but should not cause pain. If you experience pain from the bandages, they should be removed immediately and report this to your therapist. You should not try to reapply the bandages yourself.

What happens after my course of CDT?

After a successful course of CDT your therapist will guide you on how to maintain your symptoms. This maintenance programme will include 4 important areas

- Compression garment: your therapist will arrange for a suitable garment for you.
- Skin care: your therapist will advise you on appropriate skin care.
- Exercises /activity: your therapist will prescribe an appropriate exercise programme
- Simple Lymphatic Drainage: a modified version of MLD which you can perform yourself.

Remember lymphoedema is a chronic condition. It is important to have an ongoing programme to manage symptoms with the support of your lymphoedema therapist to monitor symptoms through regular checkups.

References:

International Consensus Document. Best Practice for the Management of Lymphoedema. Published by Medical Education Partnership. London