

What is Lymphedema?

Lymphedema is a very common and serious condition, affecting at least 3 million Americans. It occurs if the lymphatic system becomes insufficient and is unable to perform its normal functions. The result is an abnormal accumulation of water and proteins principally in the subcutaneous tissues.

Lymphedema is most commonly present in the extremities, it may also affect the trunk, abdomen, head and neck, the external genitalia as well as in inner organs; its onset is gradual in some patients and sudden in others. Most patients in the Western Hemisphere develop lymphedema after surgery and/or radiation therapy for various cancers (breast, uterus, prostate, bladder, lymphoma, melanoma), in which case it is referred to as secondary lymphedema. Other patients develop it without obvious cause at different stages in life (primary lymphedema), and still others develop it after trauma or deep vein thrombosis. In third world countries, parasites (filariasis) account for millions of cases.

Lymphedema is serious due to its long-term physical and psychosocial consequences for patients; it continues to progress if left untreated.