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# **Veterans Living with Lymphedema: A Silent Struggle Deserving Recognition**

## **Introduction**

For many veterans, the battle doesn't end when they return home. While much of the focus remains on visible injuries and PTSD, a less-discussed condition impacts thousands of service members and veterans across the country: lymphedema.

## **What Is Lymphedema?**

Lymphedema is a chronic condition caused by damage or blockage to the lymphatic system, leading to swelling—most often in the arms or legs. It can result from surgery, radiation, infection, or injury. In veterans, lymphedema is frequently a secondary condition following cancer treatment, traumatic injuries, or surgical procedures during military service.

The symptoms include persistent swelling, discomfort, heaviness, reduced mobility, and frequent infections. If left untreated, lymphedema can become debilitating, both physically and emotionally.

## Why Are Veterans at Risk?

Military service exposes individuals to physical trauma, environmental hazards, and rigorous physical demands. Combat injuries, surgeries, and the aftermath of cancer (especially prostate or breast cancer in older veterans) increase the likelihood of lymphatic system damage. Additionally, physical exertion and exposure to harsh environments can aggravate pre-existing conditions or go unnoticed until years later.

Despite these risks, lymphedema often goes underdiagnosed or mismanaged in the veteran population. Lack of awareness among healthcare providers and limited access to specialized care—especially in rural areas or within specific VA systems—can delay diagnosis and treatment.

## Living with Lymphedema: The Veteran Experience

For veterans, lymphedema can be more than a health issue; it can affect every aspect of daily life. Once routine tasks—putting on boots, working with tools, staying active—can become painful or impossible. The emotional toll can be just as heavy. Veterans often express frustration, isolation, and anxiety about their future.

Yet, like many challenges faced in service, those living with lymphedema show immense resilience. They can regain control of their health and well-being with the proper support, education, and care.

## Treatment and Support

While lymphedema is not cured, the condition can be managed effectively. Treatment usually involves:

- **Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT):** A combination of manual lymphatic drainage, compression garments, exercise, and skincare.
- **Pneumatic Compression Devices:** Often used at home to assist with lymphatic flow.
- **Surgical Options:** In some cases, procedures like lymph node transfers or bypass surgeries may be considered.

- **Veteran-Specific Resources:** Many VA hospitals now offer lymphedema clinics or refer to outside specialists, but access can vary. Advocating for referrals and education is essential.

## **A Call for Greater Awareness**

Veterans living with lymphedema deserve recognition and comprehensive care. Increased training for VA providers, better access to certified lymphedema therapists, and greater inclusion of lymphatic health in military transition programs could dramatically improve outcomes.

Understanding lymphedema is a powerful first step for the veteran community and their families. Whether through peer support, advocacy, or seeking out specialized care, no veteran should have to navigate this journey alone.

## **Conclusion**

Lymphedema may not be as visible as other injuries, but its impact is profound. By shedding light on this condition among veterans, we can ensure that those who served our country receive the support, respect, and care they deserve.



## **Interested in taking an ACOLS Course?**

The Academy of Lymphatic Studies offers certification courses in lymphedema management and manual lymphatic drainage. CEU's are available for nurses in select states!

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