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Highlight: Aquatic Therapy Benefits for Lymphedema Management

How Water-Based Exercise Supports a Healthier Lymphatic System

Introduction

Managing lymphedema requires a comprehensive approach—and **regular, targeted exercise** is a cornerstone of adequate care. Movement is vital to stimulating lymph flow, maintaining joint mobility, and supporting long-term function. For many individuals with lymphedema, **aquatic therapy** offers an ideal environment to exercise safely and effectively.

Why Exercise Matters for Lymphedema

The lymphatic system relies on muscle movement and joint activity to transport lymph fluid through the body. Unlike the circulatory system, it has no central pump like the heart. **Physical activity activates the "muscle pump" mechanism**, encouraging lymph to flow out of affected areas and into the central circulation.

When done consistently and correctly, exercise can:

- Decrease swelling
- Reduce tissue fibrosis
- Improve strength and range of motion
- Enhance overall function and quality of life

However, not all types of exercise are appropriate for individuals with lymphedema. That's where aquatic therapy shines.

Why Water Works for Lymphedema

Water offers a low-gravity, high-support environment. Its natural **hydrostatic pressure** mimics compression, while buoyancy reduces the strain on joints and tissues. Together, these create an optimal setting for safe and effective exercise that supports lymphatic health.

Key Benefits of Aquatic Therapy

1. Built-In Compression

The pressure exerted by water increases with depth, creating a gentle compression effect similar to bandaging or compression garments. This helps facilitate lymphatic drainage—especially when combined with movement.

2. Joint-Safe, Low-Impact Movement

Water supports the body, reducing impact and stress on joints. This allows individuals to perform a broader range of exercises with less discomfort, making it ideal for those with limited mobility, post-surgical restrictions, or chronic joint conditions.

3. Enhanced Lymph Flow Through Muscle Activation

Aquatic exercises promote the repetitive muscle contractions needed to activate the muscle pump. The surrounding pressure amplifies this action, helping move stagnant lymph fluid more efficiently.

4. Pain Relief and Relaxation

Warm water can ease soreness, reduce stiffness, and provide psychological comfort—important for those living with lymphedema's daily physical and emotional challenges.

5. Strength, Flexibility, and Balance

Regular aquatic therapy improves muscle tone, range of motion, and coordination. These gains support lymphatic health and increase confidence and independence in daily life.

Getting Started with Aquatic Therapy

Before beginning any exercise program, individuals with lymphedema should consult a **Certified Lymphedema Therapist (CLT)** or a physical therapist training in aquatic techniques. A customized plan should consider the individual's stage of lymphedema, comorbidities, and functional goals.

Therapy may be conducted:

- One-on-one in a clinical setting
- In group classes designed for lymphatic health
- Independently, once a safe and effective routine is established

Safety Tips to Keep in Mind:

- Do not enter the pool with open wounds or active skin infections
- Avoid hot tubs or very warm water, which may increase swelling
- Follow compression garment recommendations after therapy
- Stay hydrated before and after exercise

In Summary

Exercise is essential in managing lymphedema, and aquatic therapy offers one of the most accessible and effective ways to get moving. With its unique combination of compression, buoyancy, and resistance, water supports lymphatic flow, eases pain, and promotes strength and flexibility. Aquatic therapy provides a refreshing path toward better health, whether just beginning your lymphedema journey or looking to maintain progress.



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