



Exercise Spotlight: Strength Training Safely with Lymphedema

Introduction

Strength training has long been recognized as an essential component of health and wellness, helping to improve muscle tone, bone density, and overall functional strength. However, for individuals with lymphedema, lifting weights or engaging in resistance exercise can cause understandable hesitation. The good news? With the right approach, strength training can be safe and beneficial for those managing lymphedema.

Why Strength Training Matters

Contrary to outdated beliefs that discouraged resistance exercise for people with lymphedema, research shows that progressive strength training can *support* lymphatic health. Muscle contractions stimulate lymph flow, helping to reduce fluid buildup and support the body's natural drainage pathways. In addition, improving overall strength and endurance enhances mobility, balance, and quality of life—key factors in maintaining long-term wellness.

Safety First: Setting the Foundation

Before beginning or modifying an exercise program, it is essential to consult with a certified lymphedema therapist (CLT) or a healthcare provider experienced in lymphatic disorders. They can assess your needs, limb volume stability, and any precautions related to your stage or type of lymphedema.

A few foundational safety guidelines include:

- **Start Slow and Progress Gradually:** Begin with light resistance and fewer repetitions. Allow your body time to adapt before increasing weight or intensity.
- **Monitor for Changes:** Watch for increased swelling, heaviness, or discomfort in the affected limb. These may indicate that the intensity or duration needs adjustment.
- **Compression is Key:** Always wear your prescribed compression garment during strength training, as it supports tissue stability and assists lymph flow.
- **Warm Up and Cool Down:** Gentle mobility work and stretching before and after sessions help prepare tissues and promote circulation.

Best Types of Strength Training for Lymphedema

Safe strength training doesn't have to mean heavy lifting or gym-based workouts. Many practical exercises can be performed at home or in a clinic using resistance bands, light dumbbells, or body weight.

Recommended approaches include:

- **Resistance Band Exercises:** Low-impact, easily adjustable, and ideal for gradual progression.
- **Bodyweight Movements:** Squats, wall push-ups, and modified planks build functional strength safely.
- **Aquatic Strength Training:** Exercising in water offers gentle resistance and natural compression, making it an excellent option for people with lymphedema.
- **Circuit Training with Rest Intervals:** Alternating upper and lower body movements can prevent localized fatigue and encourage full-body lymph flow.

Mindful Movement and Recovery

Strength training should always be paired with mindful observation and recovery. Deep breathing, self-manual lymph drainage (MLD) techniques, or gentle range-of-motion exercises on rest days support the lymphatic system's natural rhythms.

Listening to your body is vital—what feels good and empowering one day may need adjustment the next. Consistency, patience, and proper guidance lead to improved strength, reduced symptoms, and greater confidence in physical activity.

Empowerment Through Movement

Strength training isn't just about muscles—it's about reclaiming function, independence, and self-trust. With careful planning and professional support, individuals with lymphedema can safely enjoy the many benefits of resistance exercise. The key is not avoiding movement but *moving with awareness and intention*.



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