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Swelling Fluctuations in December: Why Salt, Stress, and Sedentary Time Peak This Month

Introduction

December, marked by warmth and celebration, often brings increased swelling for those with lymphedema. These changes result from physiological factors unique to the season. Recognizing these patterns helps maintain control over symptoms.

Here are the three main reasons swelling tends to worsen in December: higher salt intake, increased stress, and more sedentary time.

1. Salt: The Silent Holiday Trigger

Between festive meals, grab-and-go snacks, and catered events, December is one of the saltiest months of the year.

Why Salt Matters

Salt influences swelling because **sodium pulls water into the extracellular space**—the same space where lymph fluid accumulates when the system is overwhelmed or obstructed. When sodium intake spikes:

- Your body retains more fluid
- The lymphatic load increases
- Existing edema can worsen or feel “heavier”
- Compression garments may feel tighter

Holiday-Specific Salty Culprits

- Cured meats (charcuterie boards, holiday hams)
- Packaged snacks
- Restaurant meals
- Holiday soups, sauces, and gravies
- Bread, stuffing, and baked goods

Your December Strategy

Aim for balance rather than restriction. Try pairing salty foods with potassium-rich choices such as citrus fruits, winter squash, or leafy greens. Drink extra water and use your compression garments more proactively after a salty meal.

2. Stress: The Cortisol–Inflammation Link

While December offers joy, it also raises stress levels due to travel, finances, social expectations, and disrupted routines. Your lymphatic system responds to these seasonal pressures.

Why Stress Increases Swelling

When stress rises, your body releases **cortisol**, a hormone that:

- Increases inflammation

- Encourages water retention
- Impacts blood and lymphatic flow
- Can flare symptoms like heaviness, tightness, and fatigue

Chronic stress also weakens immune resilience during a month when colds, flu, and winter viruses circulate heavily—adding further strain on lymphatic pathways.

Your December Strategy

Simple routines have the greatest impact: practice slow breathing before events, stretch for 10 minutes in the morning, limit commitments, and keep your sleep schedule as consistent as possible.

3. Sedentary Time: The Holiday Movement Slowdown

Holiday routines often lead to more sitting—car rides, long meals, movie nights, and winter weather all limit movement. This reduces the muscle activity that helps move lymph through the body.

Why Sedentary Time Matters

The lymphatic system has no central pump. It relies on:

- Muscle contractions
- Deep breathing
- Joint movement
- External pressures (like compression)

Long periods of sitting or inactivity dramatically slow lymph flow, particularly in the legs, abdomen, and pelvic region.

Holiday-Specific Contributors

- Flights or long drives
- Weather that keeps people indoors
- Back-to-back gatherings
- End-of-year work deadlines
- Winter fatigue and fewer daylight hours

Your December Strategy

Mini-movements work wonders:

- 3–5 minutes of walking every hour
- Ankle pumps, knee bends, or arm circles during travel
- Stretching before and after long meals
- Using compression regularly when routines shift

Putting It All Together: Why December Hits Hard

December stands out because salt intake increases, stress levels rise, and most people move less—all at the same time. This creates a perfect storm of factors that increase the risk of swelling.

- **Sodium intake increases**
- **Stress hormones surge**
- **Movement decreases**

Each one increases lymphatic load; together, they intensify the challenge. Recognizing this pattern enables patients to anticipate changes and avoid feeling surprised or discouraged.

A Compassionate Reminder

If December swelling increases, remember this is a physiological response—not a failure. Awareness and steady habits can maintain comfort. Allow yourself to enjoy the season authentically.



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