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When Manual Lymphatic Drainage Helps—and When It Should Be Avoided

Introduction

Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) is an effective therapeutic technique when used appropriately. It supports lymphatic flow, reduces swelling, and helps regulate inflammation. However, like any medical or therapeutic intervention, MLD is not suitable for everyone at all times. Understanding when MLD is helpful—and when it should be postponed or avoided—is essential for safe, effective care.

When Manual Lymphatic Drainage Is Helpful

MLD is most beneficial when the lymphatic system is overloaded but structurally capable of responding to gentle stimulation. Typical situations where MLD is appropriate include:

Post-surgical swelling. After surgery, lymphatic vessels may be disrupted or temporarily impaired, leading to fluid accumulation. MLD can help redirect lymph flow, reduce swelling, and support tissue healing once medical clearance is given.

Lymphedema management. For both primary and secondary lymphedema, MLD plays a key role in reducing limb volume, softening tissues, and maintaining long-term stability when combined with compression and movement.

Chronic venous insufficiency and edema. When venous return is compromised, the lymphatic system often compensates. MLD can help reduce leg congestion and discomfort.

Fibrosis and tissue hardening. In areas of long-standing swelling, MLD can support tissue softening and improve mobility when performed consistently and appropriately.

Inflammation-related swelling. In certain inflammatory conditions, MLD may help reduce fluid buildup and support the body's natural resolution processes.

When MLD Should Be Avoided or Postponed

There are times when stimulating lymphatic flow may place unnecessary strain on the body or worsen an underlying condition. MLD should **not** be performed—or should be delayed—under the following circumstances unless explicitly cleared by a medical provider:

Active infection. Signs such as fever, chills, redness, warmth, or rapidly spreading swelling may indicate an infection, such as cellulitis. MLD can potentially spread infection through the lymphatic system and should be avoided until fully treated.

Uncontrolled congestive heart failure. Because MLD increases fluid movement back toward the heart, it may overload an already compromised cardiovascular system.

Acute deep vein thrombosis (DVT). MLD is contraindicated when a blood clot is suspected or confirmed, as increased circulation could dislodge it.

Active cancer without medical clearance. While MLD is often safely used in oncology care, it should only be performed with appropriate medical guidance when cancer is active or treatment is ongoing.

Severe kidney dysfunction. If the kidneys are unable to manage increased fluid return, MLD may worsen the fluid imbalance.

Precautions That Require Professional Assessment

Some situations are not absolute contraindications but require careful evaluation and modification by a trained lymphatic therapist:

- Recent surgery without clearance

- Radiation-treated tissues
- Fragile or compromised skin
- Autoimmune flare-ups
- Chronic infections or wounds

In these cases, technique, pressure, treatment area, and session length may need to be adjusted—or treatment may be temporarily deferred.

Red Flags Patients Should Never Ignore

Patients should stop treatment and seek medical advice if they experience:

- Sudden or unexplained swelling
- New pain, redness, or warmth in a limb
- Shortness of breath or chest discomfort
- Fever or flu-like symptoms after swelling onset
- Rapid changes in skin color or texture

These symptoms may signal conditions that require medical attention rather than lymphatic therapy.

Why Proper Training Matters

MLD is not a generic massage technique. Safe and effective lymphatic care requires advanced training in lymphatic anatomy, physiology, and pathology. A properly trained therapist can screen for contraindications, modify treatment plans, and collaborate with medical providers as needed.

The Bottom Line

Manual lymphatic drainage can be an invaluable part of recovery and long-term swelling management—but only when used at the right time and for the right reasons. Understanding when MLD is beneficial and when it should be avoided protects patient safety and ensures that the lymphatic system is supported rather than overwhelmed.

In lymphatic care, timing, technique, and clinical judgment matter.



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