Why Winter Is Prime Time for Latent Infections to Reactivate

Introduction

For many people with lymphedema or lymphatic compromise, winter brings more than cold temperatures and dry skin. It often marks a noticeable increase in unexplained redness, tenderness, fatigue, or “flare-like” symptoms—sometimes weeks after the holidays have passed.

One under-discussed reason: **winter creates the perfect conditions for latent infections to reactivate**.

Latent infections are pathogens that remain dormant in the body, held in check by the immune system. When lymphatic flow, skin integrity, or immune surveillance are compromised—conditions common in winter—these pathogens can resurface.

What Are Latent Infections?

A latent infection occurs when a virus, bacteria, or fungus remains inactive in the body after the initial exposure or illness. The immune system suppresses it, but does not eliminate it entirely.

Common examples include:

- Certain **bacterial skin organisms**
- **Fungal infections** that remain subclinical
- Viruses that persist in nerve or immune tissue
- Low-grade infections following minor skin breaks or inflammation

For individuals with lymphedema, the **lymphatic system plays a central role** in keeping these organisms suppressed through fluid movement, immune cell transport, and waste clearance.

Why Winter Creates the Perfect Storm

1. Reduced Lymphatic Flow

Cold temperatures cause vasoconstriction, which limits fluid movement in peripheral tissues. At the same time, people tend to move less in winter, reducing the muscle pump that supports lymphatic circulation.

Slower flow means:

- Delayed immune cell transport
- Increased stagnation in already vulnerable areas
- Reduced clearance of inflammatory byproducts

This creates an environment where dormant pathogens can regain activity.

2. Compromised Skin Barrier

Dry winter air, indoor heating, and frequent hand washing strip the skin of protective oils. Microcracks—often invisible—form in the skin barrier, particularly on limbs affected by lymphedema.

These tiny openings allow bacteria and fungi to:

- Enter tissue more easily
- Bypass surface immune defenses
- Trigger low-grade or acute infections

In lymphedema, where immune surveillance is already impaired, this risk is amplified.

3. Increased Immune Load

Winter places additional demands on the immune system:

- Cold and flu exposure
- Seasonal inflammation
- Stress-related immune suppression
- Reduced sunlight affects immune regulation

When immune resources are diverted elsewhere, **latent infections may take advantage of the opportunity to reactivate**.

4. Delayed Symptom Recognition

Winter clothing, reduced skin visibility, and baseline swelling can make early signs of infection harder to detect. Redness, warmth, or tenderness may be mistaken for:

- Cold sensitivity
- Compression irritation
- “Normal” winter swelling

By the time symptoms are clear, the infection may already be established.

Why This Matters for Lymphedema Patients

The lymphatic system is not just a drainage system—it is a **key component of immune defense**. When lymphatic flow is compromised, infections are not only more likely to occur but also more likely to recur.

This is why:

- Cellulitis often clusters in the winter months
- Minor skin issues escalate more quickly
- Recovery from infections may take longer

Preventing reactivation is far more effective than treating repeated infections.

What You Can Do to Reduce Winter Risk

Prioritize Skin Integrity

- Moisturize daily with fragrance-free products
- Address cracks, fungal changes, or wounds immediately
- Protect skin from extreme cold and dryness

Support Lymphatic Flow

- Maintain consistent compression use
- Stay gently active, even indoors
- Avoid long periods of immobility

Monitor Subtle Changes

- Increased warmth, tenderness, or heaviness
- Sudden fatigue or flu-like symptoms without illness
- Skin color changes that persist

Early reporting leads to earlier intervention.

Consider Preventive MLD Care

Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD) supports lymph flow, reduces stagnation, and assists immune cell transport—particularly during seasons when natural movement is reduced.

The Bottom Line

Winter is not inherently dangerous—but it **does stress the lymphatic and immune systems, allowing latent infections to resurface**, especially in individuals with lymphedema.

Understanding why this happens empowers patients to take proactive steps—protecting skin, supporting lymphatic flow, and recognizing early warning signs before infections escalate.

Prevention, consistency, and early awareness remain the most powerful tools for staying well through the winter months.

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!

For more information, course listings, and to register for an upcoming course, Click Here!