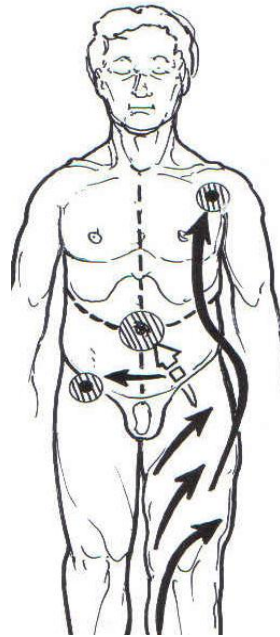


Manual Lymph Drainage and its Role in the Treatment of Lymphedema

Manual lymph drainage (MLD) is one of the main components of complete decongestive therapy (CDT). In combination with compression therapy, skin and nail care and decongestive exercises, MLD performs the crucial role of re-routing stagnated lymphatic fluid, which is essential in the treatment and management of primary and secondary lymphedema. This gentle manual treatment technique is based on four basic strokes, which were first described by Dr. Emil Vodder (1896-1986), PhD.

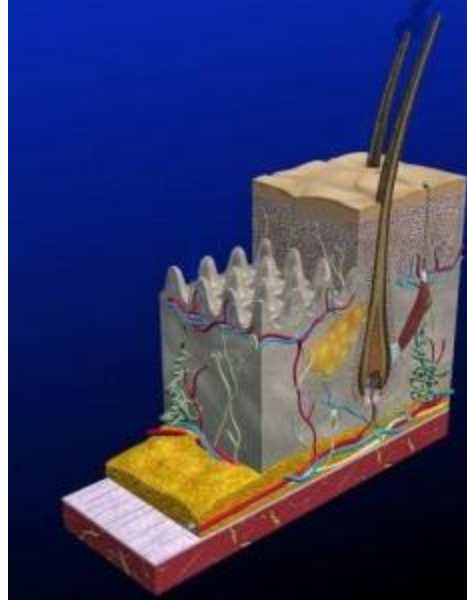
The goal of MLD is to stimulate healthy lymph vessels and lymph nodes, which generally are located adjacent to the area of non-functioning or blocked lymphatic drainage, and to re-route the lymph flow around these blocked areas into more centrally located healthy lymph vessels and nodes. This is achieved with specific stretches and manipulations - a common denominator in all MLD strokes - to the skin and those structures located directly beneath the skin, the subcutaneous tissues.



The resulting increase in lymphatic activity in the healthy areas creates a “suction effect”, which stimulates the accumulated fluid present in lymphedema to move into an area with normal lymphatic drainage.

What is the difference between MLD and traditional massage?

It is unfortunate that the term *massage* is often wrongly used to describe MLD. The origin of the word *massage* is derived from the Greek *massain* (to knead) and is used to describe such techniques as effleurage, petrissage, vibration, etc. Massage techniques traditionally are applied to treat ailments in muscle tissues, tendons and ligaments, and in order to achieve the desired effect, these techniques are generally applied with considerable pressure.



Cross section through skin, subcutis and muscle layer

MLD on the other hand is a very gentle manual technique, designed to have an effect on fluid components and lymphatic structures located in superficial tissues, i.e. the skin and the subcutis. Lymphedema almost exclusively manifests itself in the subcutis, which is a layer of connective tissue between the skin and muscle tissues.

The only commonality between MLD and traditional massage is that both techniques are applied manually. There are significant differences in technique, pressure and indications for which these two therapeutic measures are used.

There are a number of reasonable explanations why MLD and massage are often confused with each other. One is that there is a tendency to call any hands-on manual therapeutic technique a form of massage; the other is that massage can be very helpful if applied to treat edema.

However, lymphedema and edema are two very different conditions and it is important to understand the differences. Although both conditions involve swelling, edema and lymphedema have very different causes and are treated differently. A previous blog post “[When is it Lymphedema?](#)” compares these two conditions:

Additional Resources:

http://www.lymphedemapeople.com/thesite/edema_or_lymphedema.htm