

Differences between Lipedema and Lymphedema

As outlined in a [previous entry](#), lipedema is a chronically progressive, symmetrical accumulation of fat in the subcutaneous tissue occurring almost exclusively in women. Primarily the lower extremities are affected, but lipedema may occur in combination with the upper extremities as well. Lipedema is characterized by symmetric enlargement of the limbs, combined with tenderness and easy bruising.

Lipedema is not caused by a disorder of the lymphatic system; however, it is commonly misdiagnosed as bilateral [primary lymphedema](#).

Several marked differences between lipedema and primary lymphedema can be distinguished; these differences are highlighted in the table below.



Lipedema

While lipedema always affects both legs symmetrically (bilateral appearance), primary lymphedema usually affects one leg only. If both legs are involved in primary lymphedema the swelling appears asymmetric (see image on bottom of this article). The feet are not involved in lipedema; the symmetrical distribution of fat is located between the hips and the ankles.

In contrast, the feet in lymphedema are involved in the swelling, and a diagnostic indicator known as the Stemmer sign is positive.

The Stemmer sign is a diagnostic test that involves pinching the skin on the upper surface of the toe (usually second toe) or fingers. If a fold of skin can be pinched and lifted up at the base of the second toe or middle finger, the Stemmer sign is negative. The Stemmer sign is positive and indicative of lymphedema when a skin fold cannot be lifted, but can only be grasped as a lump of tissue. This sign will become positive if lipedema develops into lipo-lymphedema. Circumstances that can lead to lipedema developing into lymphedema are explained in a [previous post](#).

Tissue in lipedema has a soft rubber-like feel in early stages and may include small fatty lumps (nodules)

within the tissues in later stages. Pressure with the thumb does not leave an indentation (no pitting) in lipedema. Lymphedema is pitting and the tissue feels firmer than the one in lipedema, especially with fibrotic tissue typically being present starting in stage 2. The cause for the onset of lymphedema are malformations of the lymphatic system, while the underlying cause for the development of lipedema remains unknown; it is thought to be associated with hormonal disorders.



Fatty nodules in lipedema

Differences at a Glance

Lipedema	Lymphedema
Symmetric (buttocks involved)	Not symmetric
Foot not involved	Foot involved
Not pitting	Pitting edema
Stemmer sign negative	Stemmer sign positive
Tissue feels rubbery	Tissue feels firmer (starting stage 2 lymphedema)
Painful to touch	Generally not painful to touch
Easy bruising	Generally not bruising
Hormonal disturbances frequent	Generally no hormonal disturbance



Stemmer sign; positive on left



Primary bilateral lymphedema

Additional Reading:

<http://www.hanse-klinik.com/englisch/Lipoedema.pdf>

<http://www.lymphedemapeople.com/wiki/doku.php?id=lipedema>

<http://www.lymphedema-therapy.com/Lipedema.htm>