



The Lymphatic System: A Key to Improving Immune Function

By Colleen Martens Endrizzi, MS, CCC-SLP, LLCC

Can you name two systems of the body that transport fluid? Most people would be able to name the circulatory system. However, many would be unaware of the lymphatic system. The body's lymphatic system is very extensive and complex. A properly functioning lymphatic system is critical in the body's ability to circulate fluids, proteins, and immune cells, as well as filter toxins and waste, regenerate, and maintain strong immune function.

What is the Lymphatic System?

The lymphatic system is the body's uni-directional transport network that moves dead cells and other waste products from the tissues to the veins just before they reconnect with the heart. The lymphatic system begins with single cells called endothelial cells. They create the initial lymphatics that open, allowing fluids to enter from the tissues.

Pre-collectors, which have valves, then move the transparent lymph fluid forward on that one-way path toward its ultimate destination, an area called the angulus venosis. During the third step, the fluid goes through collectors, tiny muscular units that contract and expand, propelling the lymph fluid to transport its passengers to the lymph nodes.

The nodes filter and process the lymphatic fluid, breaking down any harmful particles, which are then sent to the appropriate organs of elimination such as the liver, kidneys, or lungs. Movement of the fluid through the lymph nodes also increases production of lymphocytes, thus enhancing the body's immune function.

What Can Go Wrong?

In people with immune system dysfunction, the movement of lymph fluid is often sluggish, causing toxins to back up and accumulate, possibly resulting in swelling. An imbalance between the sympathetic and para-sympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system can keep the body in a fight or flight mode. Very gentle manual massage of the lymph system can increase the movement of the fluid through the lymphatic system impacting the nervous system allowing for calming and relaxing of the over-active parasympathetic branch.

What is Lymphatic Drainage Therapy (LTD)?

Bruno Chikly, MD, of France developed a gentle, noninvasive hands-on technique called Lymphatic Drainage Therapy. LTD stimulates lymphatic fluid to move ten times faster than it moves on its own. A lymphatic drainage therapist (LDT) performs Manual Lymphatic Mapping of vessels to assess the rhythm, direction, depth and quality of the lymphatic flow.

After detecting the lymphatic rhythm, a therapist works with flat hands, engaging the skin with zero to five grams of pressure for a three second stretch, followed by a three second relaxation of the skin. She makes as much hand contact as possible while performing gentle stretching strokes closest to the nodes receiving the lymphatic fluid in an area. After clearing a specific area, she moves distally with precise, gentle pressure to drain body-fluid stagnation of an area, and to encourage the flow of fluids to the nodes.

What are LTD Techniques?

Following an initial clearing of an area, a therapist may do the same strokes in the reverse order to 'rinse' the region. These subtle manual maneuvers activate lymph and interstitial fluid circulation, as well as stimulate the functioning of the immune and parasympathetic nervous systems.

Therapists' techniques differ depending upon their training. However, the goal of all therapists is to remove stagnation and to get the lymph fluid moving freely.

What are the Benefits of Lymphatic Drainage Therapy?

LDT proves beneficial in treating many conditions, and in preventative health maintenance, because it increases general health. Often one sees increased range of motion, improved liver function, and better brain function as a result of the relationship between lymph and cerebral spinal fluid.

After LDT, anxious children can become calmer. Kids with sensory integrative issues become more regulated. Insomniacs sleep better. Those with attention issues focus better. The possibilities are endless! As a speech pathologist, I do LDT on the tongues and in the mouths of children with articulation problems. I find that it relieves congestion and stagnation, and the changes in tongue, lip, and cheek movement results in easier formation of sounds.

Effective lymphatic system function often increases the benefit of other therapies. It makes sense that removing debris from the body can free up energy to stimulate the immune system. Individuals with immune system dysfunction are good candidates for LDT because it helps the body detoxify, relieves chronic inflammation, and allows for deep relaxation, thus relieving insomnia, depression, and pain.

Who is Skilled in Lymphatic Drainage Therapy?

Lymphatic drainage therapy is a tool used by many trained physical therapists, occupational therapists, massage therapists, doctors, chiropractors, nurses, speech-language pathologists, or anyone with a license to touch patients. It is just one of many manual therapies for which those working to improve the health of children and adults can learn. To find someone in your area, go to www.upledger.com and use the online directory.

What Can the Patient Do?

Ask your therapist to recommend techniques you can use at home to improve lymph drainage. Some suggest using a rebounder to encourage lymph movement.

The lymphatic system is an important transport system in the body and plays a role in many functions. Even though it is critical to life, it is a system that many people have limited knowledge about it. Treat it with care and improve your health!

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