

LIFESTYLE/HEALTH

Weighted down

Chronic swelling can impair mobility, lead to health problems

By Brock Cooper
NewsTribune Reporter

While Vicki Fitzpatrick of Spring Valley was pregnant she noticed her leg had begun to swell, but didn't think anything of it at the time since swelling is a normal part of pregnancy.

After her child was born, the swelling continued and she went from doctor to doctor and test to test without ever getting an answer. The leg would continue to swell off and on for 20 years, until she was finally diagnosed with lymphedema — swelling caused by excess fluid from the lymph nodes.

"Through the years, it started getting gradually worse and worse and the doctors never had any answers," Fitzpatrick said.

It wasn't until she began working at Sonnie Blocki's physical therapist office that she finally realized she had developed lymphedema during her pregnancy.

Blocki is a licensed in treating lymphedema and practices decongestive therapy designed to unblock and increase the flow of the lymphatic fluid away from the extremities.

She uses a variety of exercise, massage and compression wraps and garments to manipulate the fluid and reduce the swelling.

"The massage doesn't actually move the fluid manually it facilitates the lymphatic system so that it can pump," Blocki said.

Complete decongestive therapy works in two phases. The first phase involved moving the lymphatic fluid out of the affected region and reduce the swelling. Blocki used compressive bandaging and massage to move the fluid. Once the fluid is moved, the patient is fitted with a graduated compression garment to keep the swelling at a minimum.

The manual lymphatic fluid drainage techniques will generally decrease the volume of the affected area to a normal or near normal size. The bandages are applied to retain the achieved reduction.

Blocki also stressed the importance of finding a certified lymphedema therapist and garment fitter.

Lymphedema most often is found in the legs and arms, especially after breast cancer surgery where the lymph nodes can be affected by surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, Blocki said. But it also can be present in the abdomen, head, face, genitals and neck.

There are two different types of



NewsTribune photos/Kam Smith

Physical therapist Sonnie Blocki wraps the leg of patient Barb Kessler of Granville at her Peru office. Kessler has chronic swelling in her legs caused by excess lymphatic fluid build up called lymphedema. The bandages help move the fluid out of the legs until a special garment can be fitted. Blocki said with treatment the affected body part can be reduced to near normal size.

lymphedema — primary and secondary. Primary lymphedema is caused by a malformation in the lymphatic system and people often begin showing signs early in their life.

"The system is not able to transport the fluid as need be," Blocki said.

Barb Kessler of Granville was born with primary lymphedema, but did not start seeing signs until she was 30. She was misdiagnosed for 20 years until a doctor finally told her she had lymphedema.

She has lymphedema in both legs. During the worst swelling, the skin around her ankles was so swollen it hung past her shoes and hit the floor.

She went through therapy about 10 years ago, but recently had a flare up again and decided to see Blocki.

"I feel much better," Kessler said.

Secondary lymphedema happens after a trauma to the body such as surgery and pregnancy. In essence, the lymphatic system goes into overdrive and eventually burns out, leading to the chronic swelling. Blocki said secondary lymphedema may be cured, but primary lymphedema has to be treated for the rest of the patient's life.

Symptoms of lymphedema include swelling, hardening of the body part, thickening of the skin, and fluid filled bubbles on the outside of the body part that looks like a blister. Also, because the skin is so taut because of the fluid,

it can be difficult for wounds to heal.

Sue Soeder of Peru has lived with lymphedema for most of her life. She said the doctors knew what it was but did not have an effective way to treat it.

She developed a wound on her leg because of a medical allergy and it didn't heal for more than 4½ years.

"It didn't seem to be getting any better," Soeder said.

She had at least two skin grafts, but they didn't take because there was too much pressure from the lymphatic fluid. After receiving treatment from Blocki, the wound has healed by 50 percent and she has lost 110 pounds.

Blocki said the weight loss is not totally attributed to fluid loss, but because of the decrease in swelling, Soeder was able to become more active and lost the additional weight through exercise.

While lymphedema does not cause any major health problems directly, it can lead to heart disease, stroke and other health problems associated with prolonged inactivity.

Lymphedema can take an emotional toll as well. People don't want to go out because of the way they look. It becomes too difficult to walk for long distances and clothing can be difficult

to buy.

"It's embarrassing more than anything," Fitzpatrick said.

Lymphedema is more common than most people realize because it often is misdiagnosed. People either believe there is nothing they can do about the swelling and learn to live with it or doctors may be unfamiliar with the affliction and prescribe diuretics.

"People don't realize there is something that can be done," Blocki said. Blocki's treatments have given Soeder a new lease on life and looks forward to continued treatment and further improvement.

"She's (Blocki) the best thing that ever happened to me," Soeder said.

Blocki said success is dependent on the person.

Someone who has lived with lymphedema for most of their life can be thrilled to just be able to wear normal shoes, wear pants that don't have to be specially made or be able to take a walk.

"That's a quality of life we are shooting for," Blocki said.

Brock Cooper can be reached at (815) 223-3206 Ext. 133 or lasalereporter@newtrib.com.

Lymphedema risk reduction practices

Skin Care

- Keep extremities clean and dry
- Apply moisturizer daily to prevent chapping/ chaffing
- Attention to nail care; do not cut cuticles
- Protect exposed skin with sunscreen and insect repellent
- Use care with razors to avoid nicks and skin irritation
- Avoid punctures such as injections and blood draws if possible
- Wear gloves while doing activities that may cause skin injuries
- If scratches/ punctures to skin occur, wash with soap and water, apply antibiotics and observe for signs of infection
- If a rash, itching, redness, pain, increased skin temperatures, fever or flu-like symptoms occur, contact a physician immediately

Activity/ Lifestyle

- Gradually build up the duration and intensity of an activity or exercise
- Take frequent rest periods during activity to allow for limb recovery
- Monitor the extremity during and after the activity for any change in size, shape, tissue, texture, soreness, heaviness or firmness
- Maintain optimal weight

On the Web:

- MyLymphedema — www.mylmphedema.com
- National Lymphedema Network — www.lymphnet.com
(800) 541-3259
- Circle of Hope Lymphedema Foundation — www.lymphedemacircleofhope.org — (203) 758-6138
- Lymphedema Awareness Foundation — www.eLymphNotes.org
(477) 324-3255
- United Physical Therapy — www.unitedphysicaltherapy.com
(815) 220-8787



The bandages used to wrap are specially designed for lymphedema patients and are not the standard bandages found in stores for wrap feet or hands for sprains. Blocki said it is important for people to not try and fix the problem themselves since it could lead to more problems.