



A CLOSER LOOK AT EDEMA

Nina Gallauresi, Executive Director, MHBP

Swelling in the body can happen for many reasons. Summer heat can cause your arms or legs to swell if you've been sitting or standing for a while. Body parts can also swell from overuse or an injury. But sometimes, swelling is a sign of an underlying medical condition.

More than half your body is made of water. Much of it flows around in your bloodstream. Water also makes up a lesser-known fluid called lymph. Lymph travels through the lymphatic system, which is made up of the tissues and organs that produce, store, and carry immune cells.

When your body fluids build up in one place, it can lead to swelling. This is called edema. You can get edema anywhere in your body—your feet, legs, ankles, hands, or even face. It can appear in one place or in many body parts at the same time.

Sometimes it's only temporary. Pregnancy can lead to swelling in the legs and ankles from the pressure of the baby. Eating too much salt can cause you to retain water. So can certain medications, like some used for high blood pressure.

"Edema can cause problems with moving around, discomfort, infections, and difficulty with wound healing," says Dr. Dhruv Singhal, a surgeon who treats lymph system problems at Harvard University. "So any kind of swelling should be looked at by a health care provider."

Edema may be a sign of a serious medical condition. A dangerous type of blood clot called a deep vein thrombosis, or DVT, can cause sudden edema. Heart, liver, or kidney problems can also lead to swelling.

In a disease called congestive heart failure, the heart has problems pumping blood around the body. This can cause fluid to pool in the legs. With liver or kidney damage, fluid can't pass through them quickly and can build up in the limbs.



Trauma to the body can also trigger edema. Singhal treats a type of edema caused by damage to the lymphatic system. This is called lymphedema. In the U.S., lymphedema is most often caused by cancer surgery.

Treatment for edema depends on the cause. If the swelling is caused by a drug, switching to a different type of medication may help. People with edema caused by a blood clot usually receive a blood thinner to break up the clot. Drugs called diuretics may be used for conditions like heart failure.

These help your body get rid of excess fluid.

"We also have certain treatments that almost all patients get, no matter what the cause of their edema is," Singhal says. These include compression garments: stockings, sleeves, or gloves that help reduce swelling. They can help reduce discomfort even if the cause of edema is something that can't be treated.

If you experience sudden swelling in one or more limbs, or minor swelling that's getting worse over time, see a health care provider right away. Early treatment for many types of swelling can reduce symptoms in the long term, Singhal explains.

Help reduce discomfort from swelling:

- Wear loose clothing and shoes that aren't too tight.
- Prop up swollen legs.
- Exercise gently.
- Limit salt in your diet.
- Take medications as prescribed.

MHBP RESOURCES TO ASSIST YOU

If you have a health concern or need advice on what to do and where to go, MHBP offers a 24/7 Nurse Line, call 800-556-1555.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please call MHBP at 800-410-7778.