Lymphedema is a chronic disease that results in swelling from a build up of lymph fluids in the tissue. This occurs when the lymphatic system is either faulty or damaged, such as a defective lymphatic system at birth or more commonly, cancer treatments that remove or damage lymph nodes and lymph vessels.

Lymphatic diseases routinely go undiagnosed and untreated. If you have had damage to the lymph nodes and lymphatic system from surgery or radiation, you are at risk of developing lymphedema. Lymphedema is considered a progressive disease, however treatments are available to provide well-controlled long-term management.

Classic symptoms of early stage acquired lymphedema include:

* One part of the body with symptoms. This will often be a limb, such as an arm after mastectomy or a leg after pelvic surgery.
* A gradual onset of swelling. Rings, bracelets, shoes, socks or elastic clothing feel tight and consistently leave indentations.
* Heaviness, achiness and skin tension in the affected area.
* Reduction of swelling by elevating the body part.

As the disease progresses, swelling is minimally reduced with elevation. The tissue volume increase is now largely due to fibrosis and fatty changes. The body part progressively becomes larger and skin changes occur. The feelings of heaviness, aching and skin tension intensify and the risk of infection increases.

Effective management can be achieved through specialized treatment. This includes manual lymphatic drainage techniques, multi-component bandaging, pneumatic pump therapy, measurement and fitting of a compression garment and instruction on appropriate exercises and self-management. Initially an intensive phase of treatment is required to reduce swelling. Therapy often involves treatment four to five days a week for the first two to three weeks. As volumes reduce and stabilize, treatments reduce in frequency as patients control their edema with daily use of compression garments. Self-management strategies, lifestyle modifications and consistent use of compression garments are shown to be effective means of controlling lymphedema.