

Manual Lymphatic Drainage and its Therapeutic Benefits

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What is Manual Lymphatic Drainage?

MLD is a highly specialised form of massage, which uses light, rhythmical, very precise hand movements, pressures and sequences and requires the therapist to develop a great degree of skill, having an intimate knowledge of the workings of the anatomy of the lymphatic system. The massage works at a skin level to influence the direction and speed of lymphatic flow, re-directing if necessary.

The lymphatic system is a complex one which integrates with other bodily systems, for example, the circulatory system and the urinary system. As well as playing a major part in immunity, it facilitates waste removal at cellular level and assists with bringing nutrients and oxygen to cells. Interstitial fluid, the fluid that bathes all cells, contains a rich soup of proteins, plasma, long chain fatty molecules, cell waste and debris and any molecules which are too big to pass into the venous system – these enter the lymphatic system and become 'lymph'.

The vessels of the lymphatic system begin as blind-ended lymph capillaries in the periphery in the layers of the skin, and progress into slightly larger vessels, then slightly larger again. These lymph vessels progress through the body passing through clearing stations called lymph nodes. We each have between 600 and 800 lymph nodes (a third of which are in the area of the head and neck), which range in size from a pinhead to a broad bean. They are arranged in clusters or chains and while we know where they are situated, in each person the exact arrangement is unique. Lymph nodes, among other things, filter the lymph fluid that passes through and re-absorb some of components to the blood stream while the rest of the Lymph passes along the vessels of the lymphatic system back to the thoracic ducts (at the base of the neck, under the collarbones) where the contents re-join the circulatory system, and go to the kidneys via the heart. The kidneys filter and process the blood and excrete the waste products as urine.

The massage is, on the whole, a very light technique. This is because the practitioner is trying to influence vessels that are situated in the skin layers. It may be as well to point out here that Manual Lymph Drainage is NOT the same as some of the 'Lymph Drainage Massage' offered by, for example, sports or Swedish-massage therapists which can be a very heavy technique indeed. Yes, that kind of heavy massage will influence lymph drainage because it will increase circulation of blood to the area being massaged but may not be suitable for someone who has a compromised lymphatic system and it is not nearly as effective in moving fluid as MLD. MLD will remove fluid from tissues without first bringing extra load to the area in the form of circulation.

The aim of the MLD therapist is to restore equilibrium in the tissues and ensure that 'that which enters equals that which departs'. If the body is not in this state of equilibrium, and there is too much fluid in the tissues, they become soft and 'boggy' to the touch. If excess fluid is present it can interfere with cell nutrition – oxygen and nutrients will take longer to pass through the tissues and get from the bloodstream to the cells through the interstitial fluid. This will also mean that waste products from cell metabolism will take longer to move from cells to the transport system, which will remove them from the body. If the lymphatic system is functioning well, we feel well. There are many reasons for the Lymphatic system to be sluggish and not functioning well, leaving fluid static in the tissues. Pollution, toxins, poor nutrition, mucous formation, overload from previous viral or bacterial infections etc – these are all things that can give rise to cellular stagnation.

Therapeutic Benefits of MLD

There are many other conditions, that benefit from the application of MLD, because of its propensity to move fluid, but MLD also has other properties that have great therapeutic value besides decongesting tissue.

Because it is a very light massage, utilizing repetitive and continuous hand movements, it has a calming effect on the autonomic nervous system which Vodder explains as "a change from a sympathetic state to a parasympathetic state" stressing the importance of the lightness of touch so as not to trigger a release of histamines in the tissue which would otherwise overstimulate. The effect is to induce a state of deep relaxation in the body allowing even the walls of vessels and bowels to be relaxed. For this reason, MLD is an excellent therapy for sufferers of hypertension.[2]

MLD is also believed to have an analgesic effect based on the Gate Theory where nociceptors (pain receptors) and mechanoreceptors (touch receptors) of the central nervous system share a synapse or pathway. A simplified explanation could be that the touch receptors are stimulated by the light, repetitive touch of MLD, these signals overtake or crowd out those sent by the pain receptors. MLD will also remove from cells the chemicals associated with the central nervous systems pain response. In practice, MLD does, indeed, have an analgesic effect.

Not yet proven but noted empirically and anecdotally, a logical consequence of MLD is in boosting the immune system. Lymph stagnation impedes the body's immunological response so speeding up the workings of the lymphatic system must promote it. Certainly, people who are receiving MLD on a regular basis, report that they no longer pick up colds and sore throats as frequently as they may have done before having the treatment.

Vodder quotes over 60 different ailments and conditions for which MLD is indicated – these include migraine and chronic headaches, common acne and acne rosacea, constipation, eczema, tinnitus, Ménière's, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid and osteo arthritis, sinus congestion and chronic catarrh, tendonitis, repetitive strain injury, whiplash and other trauma to name a few. It can be used to improve scar tissue and to reduce bruising after surgery or injury. It is an excellent therapy for rejuvenation as a beauty treatment and can reduce puffiness and fine lines and wrinkles.[3]

MLD is also an effective treatment for localized post-traumatic oedema after bruising, distortion, fracture, dislocation or surgical procedures and is a useful to complement mobilization by physical therapy.[4]

There are some people who cannot have MLD, as there are some absolute contra-indications to treatment and some cases where caution is warranted. The MLD therapist takes a full medical history to determine suitability of the treatment before sessions can commence.

References

- 1 Wittlinger, H. & G. *Textbook of Dr Vodder's Manual Lymph Drainage, Vol 1*. Haug Publishing. Heidelberg. ISBN 3-7760-1732-5. 1998.
- 2 Kasseroller Renato. *Compendium of Dr Vodder's Manual Lymph Drainage*. Haug Publishing. Heidelberg. ISBN 3-8304-0667-3. 1998.
- 3 Hurz Ingrid. *Textbook of Dr Vodder's Manual Lymph Drainage, Vol 2:Therapy*. Haug Publishing. Heidelberg. ISBN 3-8304-0689-4. 1997.
- 4 Baumeister RGH et al. Post Traumatic Lymphoedema. In Weissleder Horst and Schuchhardt Christian eds. *Lymphedema Diagnosis and Therapy*. Viavartal Verlag, Koln. ISBN 3-934371-24-8. 2001.

Further Information

For information about MLD, courses or treatments or where to find an MLD therapist, contact MLDuk either by sending an SAE to MLDuk, PO Box 14491, Glenrothes, Fife, Scotland KY6 3YE, or by telephoning 01592 748008, or visit the website www.mlduk.org.uk

For information on lymphoedema:

www.lymphoedema.org/lsn – The Lymphoedema Support Network, St Lukes Crypt, Sydney Street London SW3 6NH. Tel: 020 7351 4480 – A charity supporting sufferers and providing information and raising public awareness.

www.lymphoedema.org/bls – The British Lymphology Society, 1 Webb's Court, Buckhurst Avenue, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 1LZ. Tel: 01732 740850 – The medical association for all things lymphoedema.

www.bmlda.org.uk – The British Manual Lymph Drainage Association, BMLDA, PO Box 148, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN4 8WG. Tel: 01892 862020.

Also www.uklymph.com – An information site with an excellent General Discussion forum.