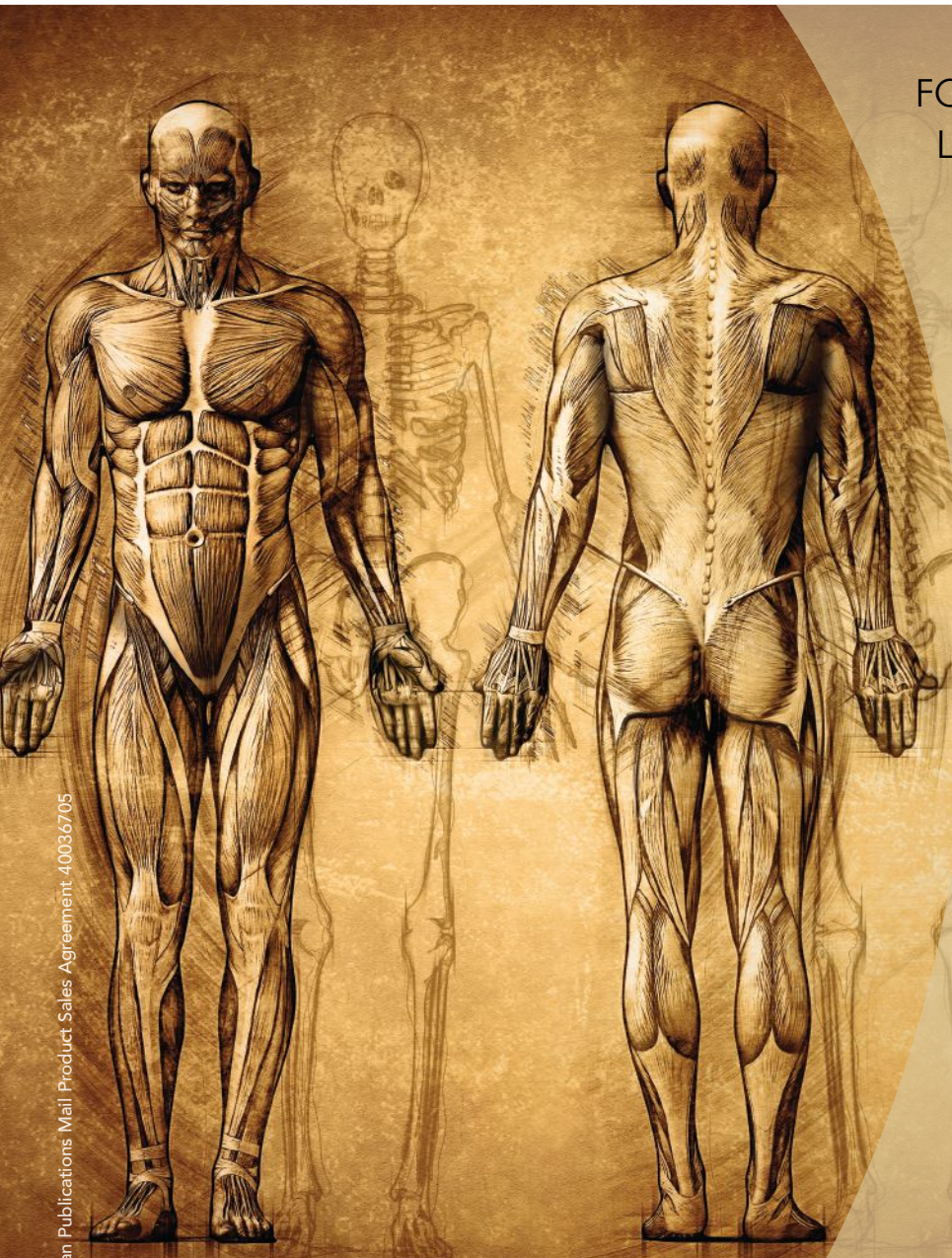


Massage Therapy Today

Putting Knowledge into Practice



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The Role of Lymphatic Drainage in Massage Therapy: A Pathway to Health and Patient Wellness

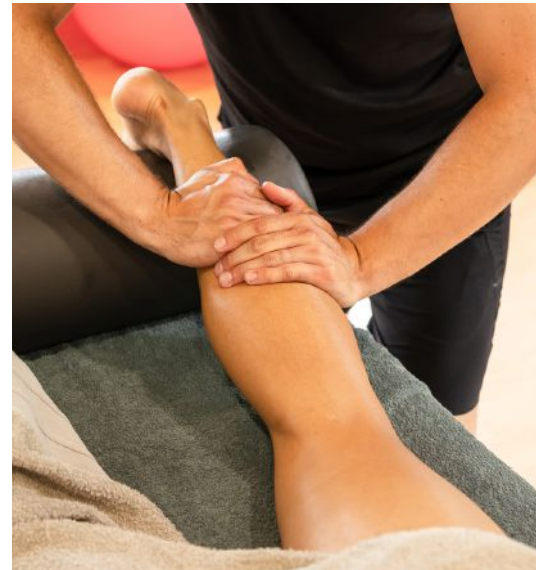
By Anne Käärid,
RMT, NHP



Anne Käärid, RMT, NHP, has worked as a therapist since 2008, bringing her experience of Eastern and Western manual therapies to her clients in the quaint town of Almonte, Ontario. Anne is also an educator and developer of lunchbox-u.com, a micro-educational platform to support massage therapists' skills and expertise. www.annethermt.com.

Lymphatic congestion is an often overlooked but critical issue in both massage therapy and overall wellness. At its core, lymphatic congestion refers to the build-up of lymphatic fluid in the tissues of the body, which can cause symptoms ranging from mild swelling and discomfort to more severe conditions such as lymphedema. As the lymphatic system plays a vital role in immune function, fluid balance, and detoxification, any disruption in its function can lead to various health issues. Commonly known causes of lymphatic congestion include physical injuries, surgery, autoimmune disorders, and chronic illness. However, you should keep in mind that it may also be caused by stress, a sedentary lifestyle, and even poor-fitting clothing that restricts natural movement - all routine subjective concerns seen on our massage table (Swain & Perkins, 2015).

As you likely know, a healthy lymphatic system is foundational to wellness because it supports the body's ability to remove cellular waste, transports nutrients and hormones, absorbs fats and proteins, and plays a role in repair and regeneration during wound and tissue healing. But let me ask you: How often do you incorporate the simple lymphatic techniques you learned into your daily massage treatments? For massage therapists, understanding and addressing lymphatic congestion through basic lymphatic drainage techniques can be profound in improving a patient's overall physical state. Even by using the rudimentary techniques learned in massage therapy school, such as pumping or clearing the lymphatic diaphragms and using effleurage or stroking distal to proximal to-



ward those diaphragms, you engage the lymphatic system in a way that plays a pivotal role in addressing these blockages and enhancing general health including creating a feeling of wellness (Moore & McDermott, 2021).

General Lymphatic Techniques vs Manual Lymphatic Drainage

While both general lymphatic techniques and manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) aim to promote lymphatic flow and alleviate congestion, it should be noted that MLD is a specialized, highly refined therapy and skill that requires advanced knowledge and extra certification to learn. An RMT's general lymphatic techniques typically involve light, general pressure applied to the body to encourage fluid movement toward the lymphatic diaphragms, often focusing on the superficial lymphatic vessels. In contrast, MLD uses specific, targeted strokes with precise

rhythmic patterns designed to stimulate the deeper lymphatic system, address moderate to severe congestion, and support the body's natural healing processes. This distinction makes MLD a more specific therapeutic technique that can be particularly beneficial for patients with chronic lymphatic issues or in post-surgical recovery requiring focused treatment for complex presentations (Angulo & Lemoine, 2019).

Integrating General Lymphatic Techniques into Regular Massage Treatments

Although MLD is viewed as a specialized area, general lymphatic methods can and should be incorporated into your regular treatments. In fact, I encourage you to revisit your school notes on lymphatic diaphragms and strokes that help move lymph fluid from congested areas to the lymph nodes for elimination.

Many patients present with symptoms of lymphatic congestion, and being able to recognize these signs is critical. Common complaints that suggest lymphatic congestion may include the following:

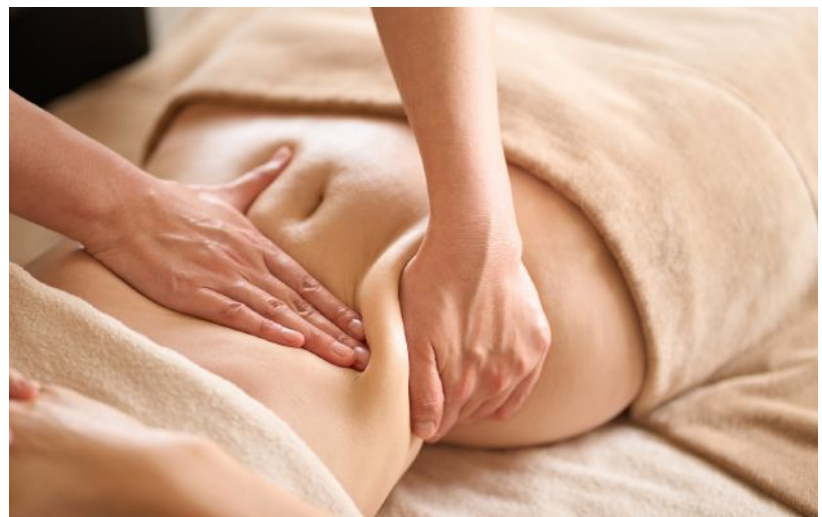
- **Fatigue, headaches, or brain fog:**
Accumulation of waste products due to poor lymphatic flow can lead to tiredness and mental fog.
- **Swelling in the limbs, face, or abdomen:**
Visible swelling signals poor drainage.
- **Bloating and digestive discomfort:**
The lymphatic system supports digestion, so congestion can lead to bloating and irregular bowel movements.
- **Heaviness or tenderness:**
Fluid buildup can cause discomfort, especially in certain areas.
- **Reduced range of motion or joint stiffness:**
Swelling around joints can restrict movement.

Lymphatic congestion is not just a temporary issue; it can signal underlying health conditions that require attention. Common contributors to congestion include the following:

- **Sedentary lifestyle:**
Lack of movement inhibits lymph flow.
- **Chronic stress:**
Stress can disrupt lymphatic circulation.
- **Chronic conditions:**
Diseases like fibromyalgia and autoimmune disorders can impair lymphatic function.
- **Post-surgical recovery:**
Surgery often causes temporary lymphatic congestion, making drainage essential for healing (Harrell & Goldstein, 2022; Van Dyke & Swartz, 2014).

By incorporating lymphatic drainage techniques into your regular massage treatments, you provide your patients with tangible relief. They will appreciate the relaxation, reduced swelling, and improved mental clarity that often follows a lymphatic session. Over time, these techniques contribute to better immune function, reduced inflammation, and an overall sense of well-being. These results make lymphatic drainage an invaluable tool in any massage practice, whether for wellness clients or those with chronic symptoms.

To effectively integrate these techniques into your practice, a thorough assessment is key. Massage therapists have been taught to identify lymphatic congestion through a combination of observation, palpation, and patient feedback. Let's review.



“Lymphatic congestion is not just a temporary issue; it can signal underlying health conditions that require attention.”

“Whether you’re treating clients with chronic symptoms or looking to elevate your treatments, these techniques are a valuable addition to your skill set.”

■ **Observation of swelling or puffiness:**

Look for visible swelling in areas like the limbs and face, or localized congestion in areas such as the neck, armpits, groin, abdomen, and behind the knees, signaling blocked lymphatic flow.

■ **Palpation for tenderness or heaviness:**

Feel for areas of heaviness or inconsistency, especially in the limbs, torso, or lymph nodes (neck, armpits, groin). Tenderness or sensitive lymph nodes, particularly in the neck, armpits, or groin, are also a clear sign of congestion or even infection.

■ **Patient-reported complaints:**

Engage with the patient during intake to identify signs of lymphatic dysfunction. Common complaints include chronic fatigue, brain fog, and a feeling of heaviness, as well as digestive issues like bloating, constipation, or irregular bowel movements, all of which may indicate lymphatic congestion.

■ **Target key areas:**

Some areas of the body are more prone to lymphatic congestion due to dense clusters of lymph nodes. Focus on these key areas for effective drainage:

- Neck and behind the ears: Lymph nodes in these areas often become congested.
- Armpits (axillary lymph nodes): A common site for lymphatic stagnation.
- Groin (inguinal lymph nodes): A critical drainage point.
- Abdomen: Important for digestive health.
- Behind the knees (popliteal lymph nodes): Key for draining the lower legs, ankles, and feet.
- Incorporate lymphatic techniques.



Once you’ve identified areas of congestion, you can apply specific lymphatic techniques to move lymph fluid toward the appropriate lymphatic diaphragm and reduce stagnation:

■ **Gentle, rhythmic strokes:**

These strokes stimulate lymph flow without overwhelming the system. Light, circular motions in areas like the neck, armpits, and groin can help guide lymph fluid through the body.

■ **Pumping movements:**

Rhythmic “pumping” actions with gentle pressure in areas like the groin or armpits help move fluid toward larger lymphatic vessels.

■ **Decompression techniques:**

Light stretching and compression help move lymph from congested areas into the bloodstream for elimination (Ratray & Ludwig, 2005).

By adding lymphatic techniques to your practice, you can improve circulation, reduce congestion, and enhance overall well-being for your patients. Whether you’re treating patients with chronic symptoms or looking to elevate your treatments, these techniques are a valuable addition to your skill set.

In today’s wellness-focused culture, patients are seeking more than just a relaxing massage—they want treatments that support their long-term health goals. Incorporating lymphatic techniques allows you to provide more personalized, tailored care that goes beyond relaxation and meets these evolving expectations.

While these techniques are primarily intended to benefit the patient, they also offer the added bonus of physical benefits for the therapist. The gentle, flowing nature of the technique places less strain on the body than conventional massage therapy treatments, which can be physically taxing.

“The gentle nature of MLD means that you may continue to offer effective treatment for a longer period, improving your career longevity and personal well-being.”

This can lead to reduced strain on the hands, wrists, and shoulders—a welcome benefit to many massage therapists!

Considerations for Extra Training and Certification in MLD

While basic lymphatic techniques are often covered in massage therapy schooling, becoming a certified MLD therapist requires specialized training. The courses focus on deeper anatomical knowledge, advanced techniques, and specific protocols for treating a variety of conditions, syndromes and even complete decongestive therapy (CDT), a multiphase treatment that helps manage moderate to severe lymphedema. If you find lymphatic work interesting and you are looking to expand your skill set, getting certified in MLD is a career game-changer.

Certifying as an MLD therapist not only enhances your skill set but also boosts your credibility and marketability. By offering a diverse range of therapeutic techniques into your practice, including MLD, you can at-

tract a wider range of patients seeking relief from conditions like lymphedema, chronic inflammation, and complex post-surgery or post-cancer recovery. Certification may open new career opportunities, allowing you to offer professional services that are increasingly in demand. Not only will you be providing a highly effective therapeutic service, you'll also be positioning yourself as a skilled professional in a growing field.

Additionally, incorporating MLD into your skill set can help prevent burnout, musculoskeletal strain and injury, postural issues, and fatigue, all of which are common in this profession because we rely heavily on using our bodies, muscles, and joints in our work. The gentle nature of MLD means that you may continue to offer effective treatment for a longer period, improving your career longevity and personal well-being.

When seeking certification, you should look for reputable programs that offer comprehensive curricula, hands-on training, and ongoing support. Well-known certification bodies, such as the Lymphatic Education & Research Network (LE&RN) or the Dr. Vodder School, provide excellent training programs for therapists who wish to expand their expertise in this area. Investing in MLD training means setting yourself apart in the competitive massage therapy market and offering transformative results that keep patients coming back!

In closing, I encourage you to not only begin integrating lymphatic techniques into your daily practice but also to nurture your personal passions for massage through continuous learning that fuels your professional growth. As massage therapists, we must remain committed to evolving, expanding our knowledge, and refining our skills. By offering holistic, patient-centered, and evidence-based treatments, you'll enhance patient satisfaction and promote lasting health benefits. Embrace the transformative potential of lymphatic drainage as a cornerstone of your professional journey, and let it elevate both your patients' well-being and your own growth as a therapist. ■

References available upon request.

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