

Liposuction for Lipedema or Lymphedema

What to expect and self-care at home

UW Medicine
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MEDICAL CENTER

What is liposuction for lipedema or lymphedema?

Lipedema is a long-term (chronic) swelling in the legs, thighs, buttocks, and sometimes the arms. It is caused by a buildup of abnormal fat cells under the skin.

Lymphedema is ongoing swelling of an area of the body, usually an arm or leg, because the lymphatic system is not working well. It often occurs after lymph nodes have been removed for cancer treatment.

Lymphedema can cause fluid swelling in an arm or leg. Over time, it can also cause fatty tissue buildup.

Liposuction is surgery that removes fat cells from an area of the body. It involves passing a thin tube called a *cannula* under the skin. Liposuction can be used to reduce fat build-up that can occur with lipedema or lymphedema.

What to Expect

Surgical Garment

- You will wake up in a compression wrap around the affected limb.
- Wear the compression wrap you were given 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for 3 months. Only take the garment off to wash it or to do daily hygiene.
- Alternatively, you may start wearing your previous compression garment when it begins to fit. Once the post-operative swelling has decreased, you may need a smaller-size compression garment.

Incision Care and Healing

You will have small skin punctures where the liposuction cannula was passed beneath your skin. Each one may be closed with a small stitch that will dissolve on its own.

- If your incision has strips of white tape (Steri-Strips) over it, leave them in place until they fall off. If the Steri-Strips are still in place when you come to the clinic for your first follow-up visit, your provider will remove them
- Some bloody fluid may drain from these punctures for 24 to 72 hours. You may need to change the dressing over these punctures 2 to 3 times a day until they stop draining.
- Bruises may form at the sites near where you had liposuction and may also spread to nearby areas. These bruises may be deep in color and take a long time to go away.
- To help reduce swelling, pain, and bruising, you may apply a cold pack to the areas where you have had liposuction:
 - Do not place ice directly on the skin. Place a cloth or thin towel between the ice and your skin.
 - Place it on the area for 20 minutes on and 20 minutes off.



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Hygiene

- Please remove the compression wrap and take a shower 48 hours after surgery. We recommend daily showers to reduce the risk of infection.
- Use mild soap and wash very gently over your incisions.
- Do not take a bath, sit in a hot tub, or go swimming until your incisions are fully healed and no scabs remain. This may take 4 to 6 weeks.

Activities

- You might have swelling in your affected arm or leg after this surgery. If you have swelling, elevate your arm or leg on pillows or a chair when at rest.
- We encourage you to walk because walking is helpful for healing and rebuilding strength. Start with 3 to 4 walks a day for 5 to 10 minutes each. Gradually increase your distance and length of time as you heal.
- Avoid *aerobic exercise* (activities that cause heavy breathing or sustained elevated heart rate) for 4 weeks after surgery.

Return to work varies from person to person and depends on the type of work you do. Please discuss with your surgeon what may be best for you.

When to Contact the Care Team:

Call us right away if you have:

- Bleeding or drainage that soaks your dressing (hold pressure on the site to lessen bleeding)
- A fever higher than 100.5°F (38°C)
- Shaking and/or chills
- Any signs of infection at your surgical site
 - Redness
 - Increased swelling
 - Increased pain
 - Bad-smelling drainage
 - Pus or cloudy-colored drainage
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- New rash
- Pain that is worsening and is no longer helped by pain medicine

If you are experiencing new chest pain or shortness of breath, call 911.

Redness, swelling, pain/cramp, or warmth—usually in one limb—may be signs of a blood clot. Please go to your local emergency room if you are experiencing any of these symptoms.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Contact your healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

During Clinic Hours (Monday through Friday except holidays, 8am to 5pm): If you have any questions or concerns, message your surgeon through MyChart. Please include a photo if it will help explain your concern.

You may also call the Center for Reconstructive Surgery at 206.598.1217, option 2.

Urgent Needs Outside of Clinic Hours: If you have an urgent care need after hours, on weekends, or on holidays, please call 206.598.6190 and ask to speak to the plastic surgeon on call.