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Leg Edema, Stasis Dermatitis, & Pigmented Purpura

The blood circulation in our legs has to work against gravity to get back up to the heart. This leads to sluggish blood flow that can result in swelling of the legs and sometimes can cause a skin rash, ulcers, and color changes in the skin of the feet and legs.

Leg Edema - Swelling of the legs is common and may be caused by many factors that include poor circulation, varicose veins, excessive abdominal fat, injury to the leg, heart & kidney disease, and medication side effects.

Stasis Dermatitis - When the blood flow in the legs is sluggish it is common to develop swelling and a red scaly rash that is often itchy. This is called stasis dermatitis. Less commonly, leg skin ulcers can develop.

There are a number of things that can be done to improve leg swelling, with or without stasis dermatitis:

- 1) Identify and eliminate predisposing factors (e.g., lose weight, treat underlying medical conditions, switch off medications (with the prescribing physician's permission) that may be playing a role [often a blood pressure medication])
- 2) Keep your legs elevated when not on your feet. Sitting in a recliner chair with your raised feet high is ideal. Putting your feet up on the couch or hassock can also be helpful.
- 3) Don't stand for prolonged periods
- 4) Don't cross your legs
- 5) Wear support hose daily. If the swelling is predominantly in the lower legs and feet, knee high support hose is fine. If it involves the thighs, full length support hose is advisable. Most people will find the non-prescription support hose sufficient for this purpose. These are available in many pharmacies and department stores as well as on-line at places like Amazon.com. Sizes can be selected based on height, weight and other factors. It is recommended to try one pair to see if it fits snugly, can easily be put on and taken off, and is comfortable to wear. Once you find a comfortable pair, purchase several pairs so that you always have a clean pair while some are in the laundry. After a while, when the support hose wear out and becomes less snug, replace them with new support hose. There are some tricks to use to make it easier to get the support on and off:
 - a. Make sure your skin is dry when putting them on, as moist skin makes it more difficult.
 - b. Put thin nylon hose (L'eggs) on first. This helps the support hose slide on easier.
 - c. Perhaps most important is to put the support hose on first thing in the morning, as soon as you get up, before the legs have time to swell up.

For people who still have difficulty putting on support hose, there are Velcro support sleeves that can be used (e.g., CircAid Juxta-Lite Legging), that are available at Amazon.com, and some pharmacies.

- 6) In some cases it is recommended that you talk to your primary care doctor, kidney doctor, or heart doctor about changing your medications if one of your medicines might be worsening the swelling, to see if a change in medications might be helpful. It may also be possible to prescribe a diuretic medication that helps your body clear excessive fluid through your kidneys.
- 7) The rash associated with the swelling (stasis dermatitis) is usually treated with a corticosteroid cream for several weeks, that may need to be used intermittently to keep the rash under control. If the cream isn't helping, it is important to be reevaluated to look for other causes or to change the treatment.
- 8) Leg ulcers require more intensive treatment and may require antibiotics and Unna boots.

Pigmented Purpura - Another condition that is related to the gravitational effects in the legs is pigmented purpura. In this condition red blood cells escape the very small blood vessels and become trapped in the skin. Initially little red dots appear. These red dots are blood cells. The red blood cells get absorbed but leave behind trace amounts of iron pigment permanently trapped in the skin. This iron pigment is an orange-brown color. Over time, with repeated leakage of red blood cells, the skin color becomes darker brown and much more noticeable. Certain medications such as aspirin and blood thinners can make this problem more likely. Treatment of this condition is the same as mentioned above for leg edema and stasis dermatitis. Studies have shown that taking daily supplemental vitamin C with bioflavonoids (Ester-C) may lessen this problem. **Ester-C** is available in pharmacies and supermarkets without a prescription.

