

Step-by-step self-massage for upper body lymphedema.

Easy-to-follow instructions for self-manual lymphatic drainage (MLD).



Take control of your lymphedema journey with the practice of self-manual lymphatic drainage (MLD).

Why do self-MLD?

Self-MLD is a way of gently using your hands to help your body move lymph fluid. Doing it regularly can ease swelling and discomfort and prevent symptoms from worsening, empowering you to stay in control of your lymphedema.

Tips for success

- Wash your hands well to keep germs away.
- Sit in a quiet, comfortable space.
- Make sure the skin you need to reach is showing.
- Massage slowly and smoothly.
- Apply light pressure — enough to gently move the skin, but not the muscles underneath.
- Use your whole hand, not just your fingertips.
- Do this once a day or as directed by your doctor.

Want to follow along with a video?



You can choose to learn with a step-by-step video if that feels easier. We teamed up with Kelly Sturm, a physical therapist, to offer videos that guide you through self-MLD. Scan the QR code to pick the video for the body part you need. You can also download this guide if you'd like extra support.

This guide was developed by certified lymphedema therapists to ensure safe self-care.

Safety considerations Before beginning any self-administered MLD techniques, please consult with your healthcare provider or care team. Self-MLD may not be appropriate for all individuals, especially those with certain medical conditions such as active infections, acute congestive heart failure, or acute blood clots. Your healthcare team can help determine whether self-MLD is safe and beneficial for your specific situation. This information is intended for educational purposes only and does not replace professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always follow the guidance of your licensed healthcare provider.

Begin by gently working on the lymph areas in your neck and abdomen.

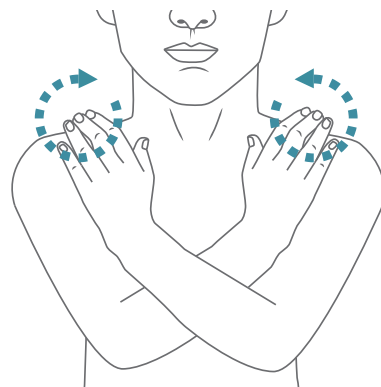
Why start here? Your lymph system moves fluid from your arms and legs toward the middle of your body and “clears the path” so fluid can move more easily from your arms and legs.

Complete these steps on both sides at the same time.

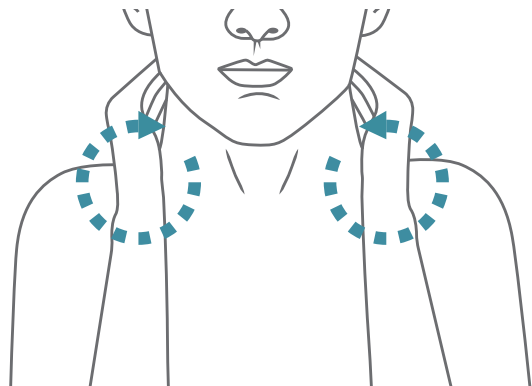
A. Neck and collarbones

This step helps lymph fluid flow back to your heart.

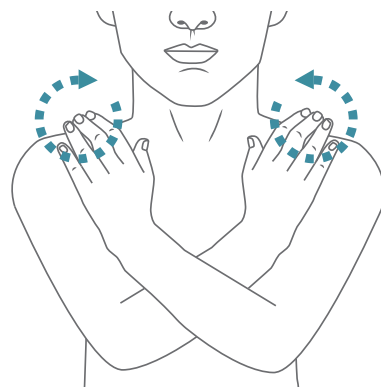
- A1.** Place your hands at the base of your neck above your collarbones; circle 5–7 times.



- A2.** Place your hands flat on the sides of your neck; circle 5–7 times.



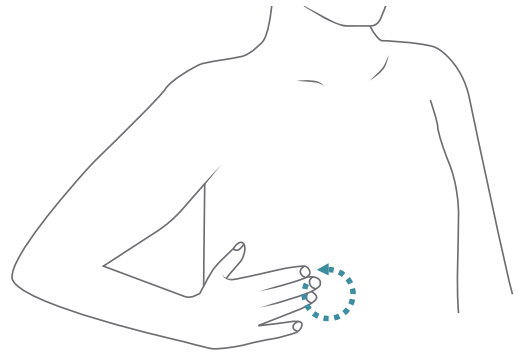
- A3.** Return your hands to your collarbone area; circle 5–7 times.



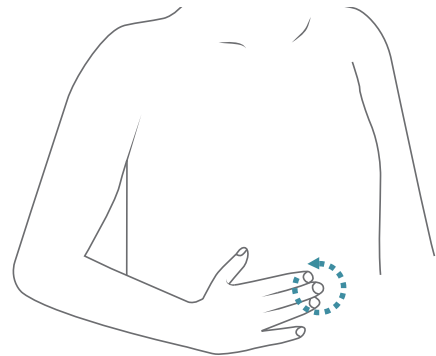
B. Abdomen

Your body has many lymph nodes and vessels in the abdominal area, so it is important to help lymph fluid move back to your heart.

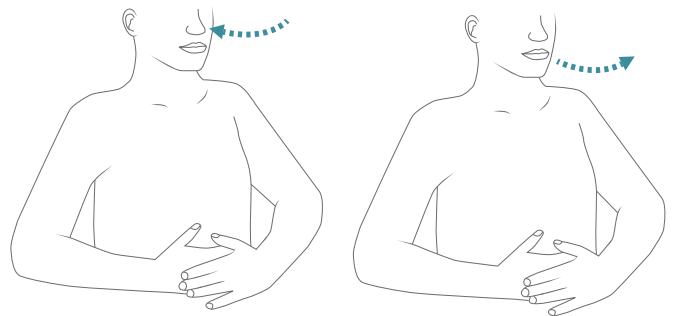
- B1.** Using the flat palm of whichever hand is comfortable, circle 5–7 times under your left ribs, then 5–7 times under your right ribs.



- B2.** Using your flat palm of whichever hand is comfortable, circle 5–7 times around your belly button.



- B3.** Stack your palms over your belly button and take 10 slow, deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth while maintaining pressure on your belly throughout.

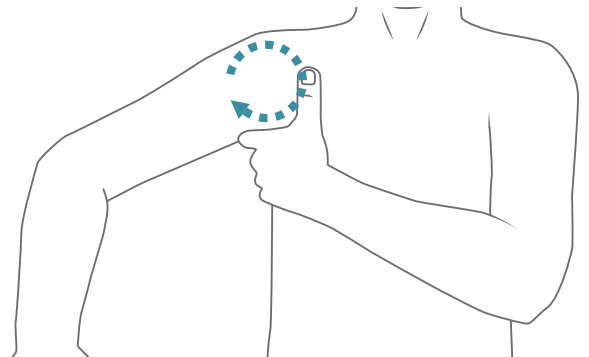


Complete these steps on the affected side(s). NOTE: If both sides are affected, for C3–C4 only; alternate treatment: treat the right side one day, then the left side the next.

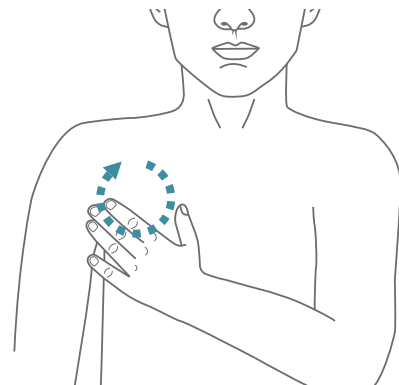
C. Chest/Breast

The goal is to help your lymphatic system move fluid away from the affected area of your upper body.

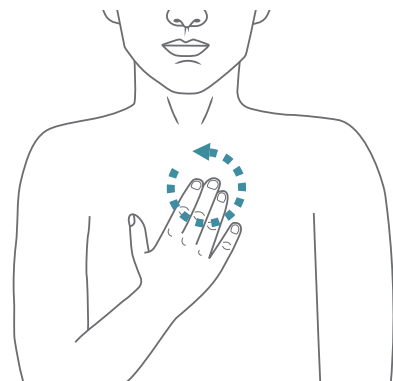
- C1.** Raise your unaffected arm slightly. Place your palm in your armpit; circle 5–7 times.



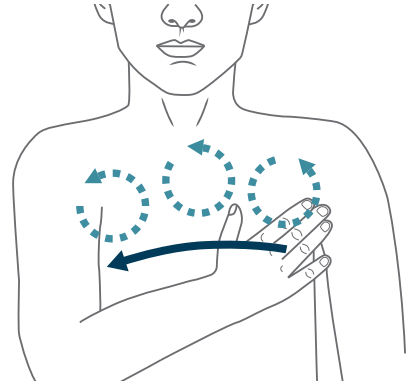
- C2.** Place your palm on your unaffected breast/chest; circle 5–7 times.



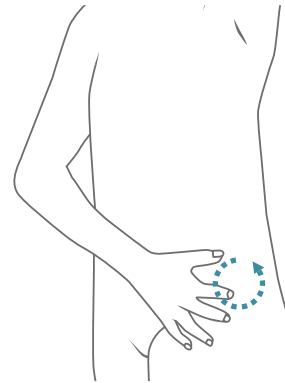
- C3.** Place your palm on the center of your chest; circle 5–7 times.



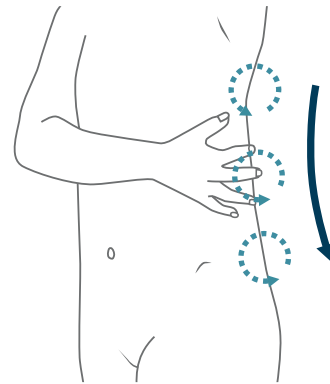
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- C4.** Starting near your affected armpit, move your palm across your chest toward the unaffected side circling 5–7 times. Repeat several passes.



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- C5.** Place your flat palm in your groin area on the affected side; circle 5–7 times.



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- C6.** From the side of your torso below the affected armpit, massage with your flat palm downward toward your groin circling 5–7 times. Repeat multiple passes.



Next, focus on your arm(s) and hand(s).

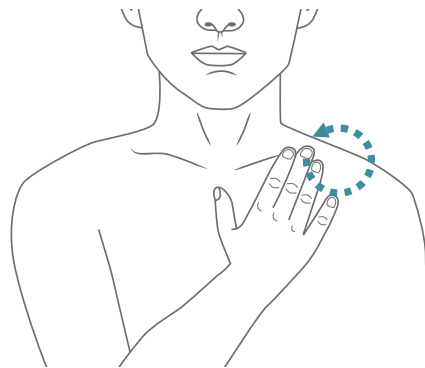
Now that your neck and abdomen have been prepared to “clear the way” for lymphatic fluid, you’ll focus on draining your arm(s) and hand(s).

Complete these steps on your affected side only.

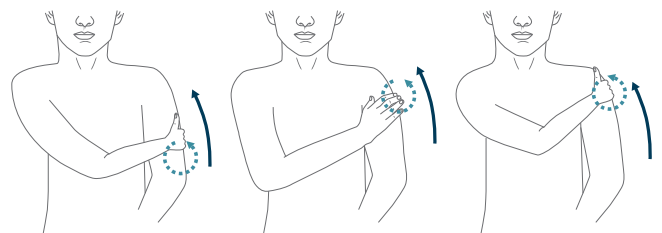
D. Arm and hand

Lymphatic vessels throughout your hand and arm help transport fluid toward your armpit lymph nodes.

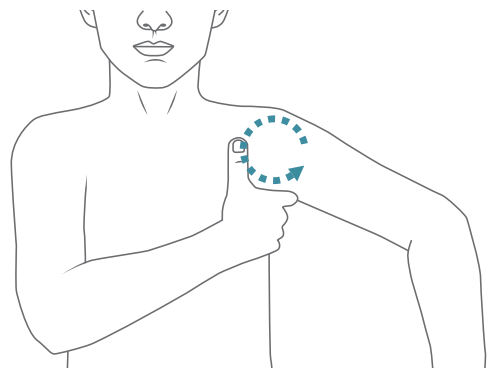
- D1.** Place your hand at the base of your neck above your collarbone; circle 5–7 times.



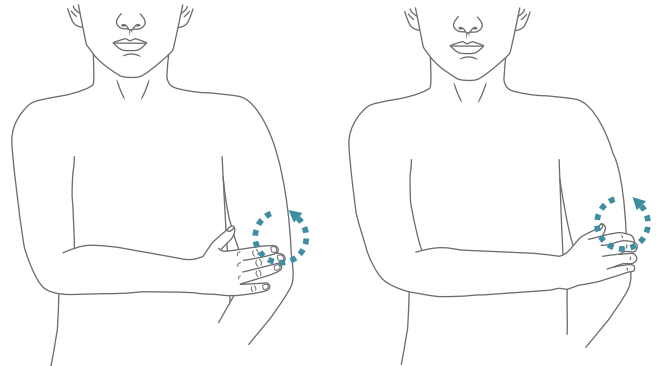
- D2.** Working upward from your elbow to your shoulder, with your hand circle 5–7 times on the outside of your arm, inside your arm, and the back of your upper arm.



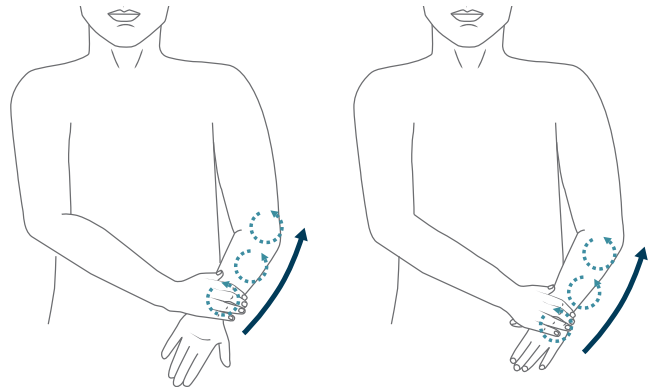
- D3.** Place your palm in your affected armpit; circle 5–7 times.



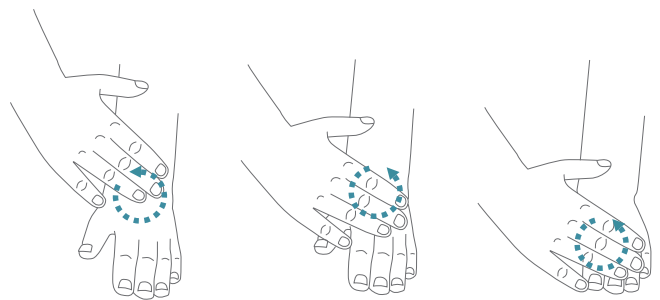
D4. Use flat fingers to massage the inside and outside of your elbow; circle 5–7 times in each area.



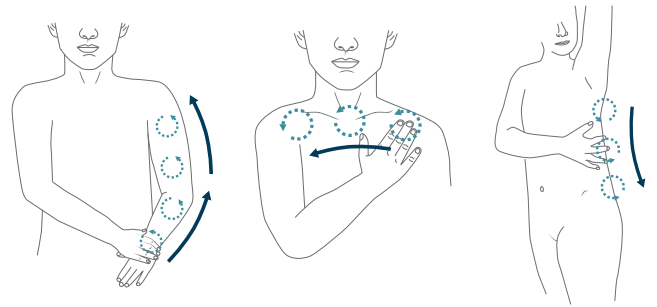
D5. Moving from your wrist to your elbow, circle 5–7 times. Do this on both the inside and outside of your lower arm.



D6. With your hand, massage your opposite wrist, then the top of your hand and fingers circling 5–7 times in each area.



D7. Starting at your hand, massage upward along your arm using light circular motions. Finish with one pass across your chest to the opposite armpit and another down toward your groin on the affected side.

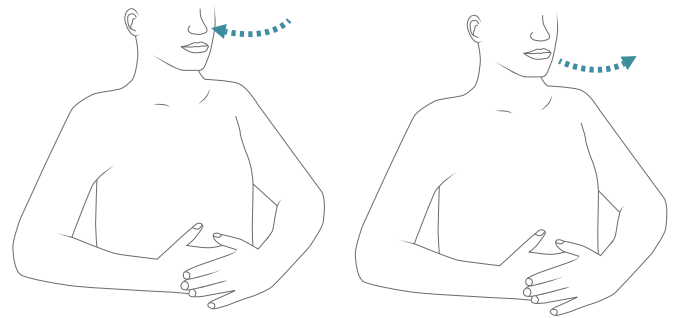


You're almost there!

E. Final clearing movements

This final step helps move fluid from your abdominal area back toward your heart.

- E1.** Stack your palms over your belly button and take 10 slow, deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth while maintaining pressure on your belly throughout.



**Congratulations on completing your self-MLD today
and managing your lymphedema on your terms!**

Tactile Medical

3701 Wayzata Blvd, Suite 300
Minneapolis, MN 55416 USA

tactilemedical.com

Customer Care

Text or Call: 612.355.5100

Toll Free Phone: 833.3TACTILE (833.382.2845)

Fax: 612.355.5101 / Toll Free Fax: 866.435.3949

Email: customerservice@tactilemedical.com

Hours: 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. CT, Monday–Friday

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