POSITION STATEMENT

Australasian Lymphology Association

Excellence in lymphoedema management, research & education.

THE USE OF COMPRESSION GARMENTS IN THE MANAGEMENT OF LYMPHOEDEMA

Approved by the ALA National Council March 2012

Introduction

This position statement has been developed by the Australasian Lymphology Association (ALA) to provide an Australasian perspective and consistent principles on the use of compression garments in the management of lymphoedema.
This document does not describe other treatment modalities where graduated pressure is applied such as compression bandaging, pneumatic pumps or neoprene wraps.

The Position of the ALA

The ALA endorses the use of compression garments as an essential treatment modality for the management of lymphoedema.

The ALA encourages prescribers of compression therapy for lymphoedema management to acquaint themselves with existing international standards, current best practice guidelines, research in compression therapy and resources available for garment provision.

Compression Garments

The term lymphoedema compression garment is a broad description of a garment that has been manufactured for the specific purpose of minimising lymphatic fluid accumulation and aiding drainage from areas of lymphatic congestion. In the context of lymphoedema, compression refers to pressure applied to the limb by the garment and is expressed in millimetres of mercury (mmHg).

Desired Features

- High working pressure and a low resting pressure (4).
- Graduated compression, with the amount of compression being higher distally and lower proximally.

Compression Garment Construction

A vast array of styles and fabrics are available to produce appropriate compression for the patient. Compression garments are categorised by manufacturing technique as flat knit, circular knit, or cut and sew.

Replacement Schedule

To maintain their effectiveness, compression garments have a limited lifespan.
Manufacturers commonly recommend a six-month replacement schedule. Individual variance can occur as a result of patient-specific factors such as level of activity, lifestyle, climate, and other co-morbidities. Compression garment replacement is required regularly, as the garment becomes stretched and no longer applies adequate compression to manage the lymphoedema.

Compression garments also have a limited shelf life when in storage. Exact timeframes can be obtained from compression garment manufacturers.

The Australasian Context

In Australia regulation of medical devices such as lymphoedema compression garments is the responsibility of the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). The TGA is a unit of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. The TGA carries out a range of assessment and monitoring activities to ensure therapeutic goods available in Australia are of an acceptable standard. Before any medical devices can be supplied in Australia, details must be included in the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods.

In New Zealand, companies which market a new medical device must inform the Web Assisted Notification of Devices (WAND) database. This does not provide automatic approval for the sale of the device but is a mandatory requirement of the health ministry.

A number of classification systems have been developed internationally to ensure the quality of compression garments. These standards cover parameters such as: testing methods; yarn specification; compression gradient; and durability. Standards include British Standard BS 6612:1985, French Standard AFNOR G 30.102 and German Standard RAL-GZ387:2000. At this time there is no Australasian standard.

Compression Garments in Lymphoedema Management

Whilst high level evidence for the effectiveness of compression garments in lymphoedema is limited, international clinical consensus support their usage (1-8).

Compression garments are primarily used in the long term management of lymphoedema. Garments are commonly used to maintain limb size and shape following a period of intensive lymphoedema therapy. They can also be used as part of initial treatment of subclinical or mild lymphoedema. Different levels of compression are required for the different stages of lymphoedema. Clinical judgement is required to select the correct compression level for an individual. A guide to compression garment prescription based on international consensus is provided below.

Level of lymphoedema	Level of compression	Equivalent compression class as per RAL standard
Subclinical/ early or mild lymphoedema	14-21mmHg	1
Moderate/ severe lymphoedema	23-32mmHg	2
Severe lymphoedema	34-46mmHg	3
Severe complex lymphoedema	49-70mmHg	4

Adapted from Lymphoedema Framework Template for practice: compression hosiery in lymphoedema. London: MEP Ltd, 2006. Page 16 (1)

Contraindications to Compression Garments

The following contraindications and precautions have been identified through international consensus (2)

- Arterial insufficiency-ABPI<0.5 in the lower limb
- Acute cardiac failure
- Extreme shape distortion
- Very deep skin folds
- Lymphorrhoea or other weeping skin conditions
- Extensive ulceration
- Severe peripheral neuropathy

The ALA recommends that therapists who are prescribing compression garments for lymphoedema management should have an appropriate level of training to enable thorough assessment of the patient and any contraindications.

Financial Implications

The chronic nature of lymphoedema often requires long term management with compression garments. The cost of regularly replacing garments may be a significant financial burden to the individual and to the health system.

There is no uniform financial assistance program for garment funding across Australia (e.g. Medicare) or New Zealand. The Australian Department of Veterans Affairs provides financial support for compression garments for eligible veterans.

The following states provide structured financial assistance programs to eligible people:

- Victoria: Lymphoedema Compression Garment Program
- New South Wales: Enable/PADP
- Northern Territory : Compression Garment Program
- Tasmania : Tasmanian Lymphoedema Garment Scheme

Other states may provide some level of funding for compression garments; however variations exist between local areas. Limited financial reimbursement may also be available through private health funds.

References

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