

‘Cancer treatment’s dirty little secret’

Advocating for Medicare coverage for lymphedema patients

By [Jan Hasak](#)

Because March is Lymphedema Awareness Month, I cherish the opportunity to educate readers on lymphedema and its relation to an important bill pending in Congress.

Lymphedema is a chronic condition caused by the accumulation of lymph fluid that causes tissue swelling, most commonly in the arms and legs. It is estimated to afflict about 3 million to 6 million Americans. It is progressive if left untreated and can put patients at greater risk for serious infection and disability.

The condition is often called “cancer treatment’s dirty little secret.” While individuals can be born with a primary form of lymphedema, the majority of cases are secondary in nature, most often caused by cancer treatments that damage the body’s lymph system or immune functions. For cancer patients, it is one of the most significant survivorship issues. Breast cancer treatment, in particular, is one of the most common causes of lymphedema, with an estimated incidence rate of about 20 percent.

Fortunately, there is hope for lymphedema patients in that the risks and complications of this disease can be mitigated by complete decongestive therapy (CDT), the gold standard for treating it. In addition to manual lymph drainage and decongestive exercises, an essential component of CDT is compression therapy.

Unfortunately, Medicare beneficiaries currently lack coverage of the compression supplies needed for CDT to be completely effective.

As a breast cancer patient, I deal with the daily challenges of managing lymphedema in my arm. In my case, the swelling was caused by removal of lymph nodes to stage my cancer and by radiation. My condition was treated by CDT, but soon I will become a Medicare beneficiary, losing my current coverage of compression sleeves.



The author is a patient-advocate in Chico and author of two books on breast cancer and lymphedema.

To help patients like me successfully treat lymphedema and manage symptoms, it is important that Congress pass H.R. 3877, the Lymphedema Treatment Act. This legislation will provide Medicare coverage of doctor-prescribed compression supplies, help reduce total Medicare spending, and decrease the incidence of costly complications and disabilities associated with the disease. Many Medicare patients cannot afford compression garments, and the resultant swelling brings on an unnecessary loss of functions in the activities of daily living.

To learn more about the Lymphedema Treatment Act and how you can get involved, please visit Lymphedematreatmentact.org. Passage of this act would be the compassionate and right thing for Congress to do.