



Position-Dependent Edema (Swelling) Management

This handout is meant to provide you with a brief overview about position-dependent edema, and how to manage it in the context of ALS. Please contact your doctor for individualized recommendations about medical interventions and management of your edema.

What Is Position-Dependent Edema?

Your body constantly moves blood and fluid through your circulatory system using your heart and the muscles in your arms and legs. If the muscles become weak, they may not return all of the fluid to the heart. Gravity causes the excess fluid to accumulate in areas of the body that are closer to the ground, causing noticeable swelling (**edema**) in the hands, lower legs, or feet.

This type of edema is called “position-dependent” because the swelling decreases once gravity is no longer holding the fluid close to the ground (like when your legs are raised up in bed). Edema often causes discomfort, and may make it difficult for you to put on your socks, shoes, or gloves. It may also cause your skin to become fragile, putting you at risk for pressure injuries.

Strategies for Managing Position-Dependent Edema

1. Elevate the affected area above the level of your heart throughout the day. Lying down with your arm or leg propped up on pillows, or using a recliner chair, hospital bed, or power tilt wheelchair, can help you to achieve this position.
2. Move the affected limb as much as you are safely able to. Continue to complete range of motion stretches to keep joints from becoming stiff.
3. Ask a care partner to help you gently massage the affected area in an upwards direction towards the heart.
4. Avoid excess heat, as this can make the swelling worse.
5. Do not wear clothing or shoes that put significant pressure on the swollen area, as this can harm your skin. If you are interested in trialing compression/airline stockings, speak to your nurse or family doctor to ensure they are an appropriate option for you.

When to seek urgent medical attention

Not all edema is position-dependent. A sudden swelling of an arm or leg could indicate a serious medical condition. You should **seek immediate attention** if the swelling is sudden (or increases suddenly) or if it is accompanied by heat, redness, pain, or numbness.
