



AMERICAN SOCIETY OF HAND THERAPISTS™

PATIENT EDUCATION RESOURCE

Hand Edema

“Working with a knowledgeable hand therapist can make the difference between success and failure in complex hand surgical cases. The therapist extends the continuum of our care, as well as functioning as coach and trainer for our patients.”

Marybeth Ezaki, MD, Past President, American Society for Surgery of the Hand

What is hand edema, or swelling of the hand?

Edema is swelling caused by too much fluid trapped in the body's tissues. Hand edema is a sign of inflammation in the tissues or joints of the hand. This fluid can collect between the skin and deeper tissue causing an increase in size of the hand. Swelling may come on suddenly, such as following an injury (with a broken bone), or it may come on gradually over months to years (with arthritis).



Hand edema is most obvious on the back of the hand, as shown here

What are the symptoms of edema?

Symptoms of edema may include an increase in size or puffiness of the tissue. Skin that keeps a dimple after being pressed for several seconds and looks stretched or shiny may be a sign of edema. There may be pain, stiffness of the joints or a feeling of fullness. Sometimes there may be dull ache in the swollen area.

Example of pain and stiffness in the hand, which are common symptoms of hand edema



What are the causes of hand edema?

Hand edema may be caused from trauma/injury, infection, arthritis and repetitive stress injury. Hand swelling can also be caused by a cast that is too tight. Depending on the cause, edema can last for a short time, such as when it occurs during or after exercise. Chronic hand edema, or swelling that builds up over time, often indicates an inflammatory process.

What is the treatment for hand edema?

A physical examination by a qualified medical professional may be done to determine the cause of hand edema. Depending on the cause of edema, treatment may include rest, elevation of the arm, immobilization, antibiotics or other medications. A referral to a hand therapist may also be recommended.

What can a hand therapist do for me?

Hand therapists can recommend compression to reduce edema, exercises to decrease edema and stiffness and specialized massage. Hand therapists can educate on the best position of the arm to reduce edema. Hand therapy is very important in

order to achieve the best outcome after having a swollen hand.



Example of a hand therapist performing specialized massage of the hand to reduce edema

To locate a hand therapist in your area, visit the American Society of Hand Therapists at www.asht.org or call 856-380-6856.