What is hand edema, or swelling of the hand?

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).

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 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.

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.

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