

Understanding Your Lymphatic System

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To the average American, the lymphatic system is one of the least understood and one of the most overlooked systems in the body. Your lymphatic system is made up of a series of vessels that run throughout your entire body, in the same way your blood vessels do. *Lymph* is the clear fluid that flows through the system, and contains lymphocytes (the immune system's T-cells and B-cells). All of your lymphatic vessels contain numerous one-way valves that cause all applied forces to channel fluid flow in the desired direction. The vessels run through strategically placed lymph nodes that can range in size as small as a green pea to as large as an almond. Clusters of these nodes can be found in your armpit region, neck, chest, abdomen, and groin.

The lymphatic system plays a critical role in your overall health by performing the vital function of cleansing the fluid that surrounds the cells in your body. It continuously collects waste fluid that surrounds your cells, cleans this fluid, and returns it to your blood circulation. The lymphatic vessels transport this fluid through your body, while your lymph nodes use specialized white blood cells to clean this fluid, removing waste products, dead cells, and even unwanted microorganisms. By removing these impurities and waste products, your body is protected from damage caused by toxins, which, in turn, allows the cells to function at their maximum potential. You can easily see how a healthy lymphatic system is important in maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

A poorly functioning lymphatic system has been associated with fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis, chronic fatigue syndrome, various aches and pains, bloating and poor digestion. Studies have shown that an unhealthy lymph system can also contribute to cellulite, fat deposits and obesity.

Actions that assure a healthy lymphatic system.

Drink plenty of chlorine-free water. The lymphatic system depends on a constant supply of fluid, so it's very important to drink six to eight glasses of water a day to keep it functioning at its best. Purified or filtered

water is the best choice. See the article entitled *How Safe is Your Tap Water, Really?* on the Featured Health Article section of this website.

Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables supply the lymphatic system with important vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and phytonutrients. The chlorophyll in green vegetables is especially beneficial to the lymphatic system.

Avoid unhealthy, processed, chemical-laden foods as much as you can. Artificial sweeteners, preservatives, refined grains, and excess sugar will also put strain on the lymphatic system. Choose foods that are organic, whole and natural, when possible. See articles on *The Truth about Artificial Sweeteners*, Milk, Sugar, Soy, and other articles about the Western Diet on the Featured Article section, as well.

Get your essential fatty acids. Healthy fats are necessary for the proper function of the lymphatic system. Good sources of essential fatty acids include cold-water fish such as sockeye salmon, pumpkin seeds, flax meal, walnuts, almonds and avocados.

Eat foods that promote flexible blood vessel walls.

Since many of your lymphatic vessels run along side of your arterial blood vessels, the strong pulsations that accompany healthy arterial blood vessels can generate a beneficial force against adjacent lymphatic vessels, causing them to more effectively move the lymph fluid along.

Keep Moving. The majority of your lymphatic vessels are enmeshed within your big muscle groups. When you move, your muscles will generate pressure against your lymphatic vessels, which in turn promotes strong and regular flow of fluid through these vessels. So, the more you move, the better. Regular exercise like stretching, walking, and strength training are all great ways to keep those lymph juices flowing.

Practice deep breathing. Much akin to exercising, deep breathing will also promote the movement of fluid through the lymphatic system, while providing it with fresh oxygen.

Take echinacea, wild indigo and goldenseal. These herbs support immunity and help cleanse the lymphatic system. These could be used as part of a yearly cleansing program.

Get a massage. Not only are massages great for helping you unwind, they also stimulate the lymph nodes and help promote fluid movement in lymph vessels. Lymph drainage massage is especially supportive of the lymphatic system.

Relax in a sauna. For those who have access to one, an hour spent in a sauna or steam bath can facilitate detoxification and take some pressure off the lymphatic system.

Hearty laughing. The practice of "belly laughing" for your health was introduced in an October 2005 article by Dr. Ben Kim. He pointed out that, specifically, one of the reasons why laughing from the belly is good for your health is that doing so promotes a healthy *lymphatic* system? He goes on to explain that he's talking about true belly laughter, the kind that can make your stomach muscles cramp up and even cause your eyes to fill with tears. He points out that genuine belly laughter causes your diaphragm to flutter up and down at a very quick rate, which generates pressure against the central lymphatic vessel that runs up the middle of your body. In effect, whenever you laugh from your belly, your diaphragm becomes a powerful pump for your lymphatic circulation, much like your heart serves as the central pump that propels blood through your blood vessels. You can't do it all the time, but the occasional "belly laugh," along with the other suggestions, above, will go a long way toward encouraging better lymphatic circulation. Isn't it amazing how a healthy body makes the most of its parts?