

Dr. Vodder's Manual Lymph Drainage and a Healthy Lymph System

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What is MLD?

The history of massage therapy is that of branching modalities which address different aspects of human physiology. Many of them release muscle, fascia, and tendon/ligament contraction. Some of them alleviate nerve impingement or entrapment. There is only one therapeutic massage technique that effectively treats the lymph system. This technique is Manual Lymph Drainage (MLD), the most effective form of which is Dr. Vodder's Manual Lymph Drainage. Although many therapists have heard of MLD, it is rarely discussed except in connection with cancer or a post cancer condition called lymphedema.

Dr. Emil Vodder developed MLD in the 1930's as an esthetic treatment for the skin of the face and neck. He found that slow, rhythmic circular movements with very light pressure on the surface of the skin impelled the drainage of fluid from the dermis. He expanded his application of MLD to conditions such as acne, rosacea, and sinusitis. In all these cases the technique he used eliminated pathological congestion.

MLD is usually defined as a light circular surface massage that stretches the skin.¹ This action is performed with graduated pressure from zero to 30mmHg (the weight of a nickel). The intent and typical result of this treatment is an increase in the transport capacity of the lymph system.²

How does MLD effect drainage?

The lymph system removes all the excess fluid in the loose connective tissue of the body that is not returned by the circulatory system. All lymph drainage begins in the dermis, where the initial lymph vessels (ILVs) are found. The ILVs are valveless, single layer endothelial cell capillaries that collect the excess interstitial fluid in the dermis. These ILVs carry the fluid called lymph to the precollectors that carry the lymph directly to the collector vessels. These vessels have a structure similar to veins. They are composed of heart shaped units called lymphangions, and are surrounded by a layer of smooth muscle and an outer covering of connective tissue.

It is the lymphangions that have valves to ensure that the lymph moves forward to the lymph nodes. A lymph node is responsible for cleaning the lymph and concentrating it by returning some of the fluid to the venous system. Lymph passes through a series of lymph nodes on its return to the blood vessel system at the venous arch. The entire lymph system drains to the circulatory system at this point. MLD employs precise circular movements on the skin, utilizing a particular sequence of location, rhythm, and pressure to initiate the flow of the interstitial fluid into the initial lymph vessels. Specifically, MLD increases the rate of contraction of the lymphangions, causing more fluid to enter the ILVs. Special training is needed to effectively use MLD to enhance the movement of lymph through the body.

The initial lymph vessels (ILVs) in the skin collect the majority of the fluid in the tissues that the circulatory system cannot return. This is the reason that MLD applied to the surface of the skin can be so effective in moving the excess interstitial fluid in the dermis.

How MLD affects other body systems:

In addition to increasing the drainage of the dermis, MLD can also affect other systems of the body. The Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) is sedated by MLD, allowing the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS) to work in the body promote restful and restorative effects. MLD also has an analgesic influence on the Central Nervous System (CNS). MLD stimulates the touch receptors (mechanoreceptors) in the CNS overriding the pain receptors (nociceptors). In the case of trauma this can be extremely beneficial.

MLD enhances the cleansing function of the body. It can be seen as a preventive treatment that cleans and decongests the skin of excess fluid. Even when we are healthy we want our bodies to function at optimal capacity. Due to its restorative effect on the Sympathetic Nervous System is a beneficial treatment to almost everybody.*

*There are some specific contraindications that will be discussed in a future article.

References:

1. Weissleder H, Schuchhardt C. *Lymphedema Diagnosis & Therapy*. Viavital Verlag GmbH, Koln 2001.

2. Same.

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Learn more about MLD at www.VodderMLD.com