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Climate and Climatic Variations' Impact on Lymphoedema: Patient Perspective

Lymphoedema is a significant problem worldwide and results in substantial burden to both health services and an individuals' quality of life. It results from a reduced capacity of the lymphatic system to drain lymph fluid and is characterized by ongoing swelling, primarily seen in the limbs. If left untreated, lymphoedema can cause significant problems including progressive swelling, limb deformity, skin changes, reduced mobility, joint stiffness, loss of strength, and increased risk of cellulitis. It is primarily managed through compression, skin care, exercise and manual lymphatic drainage. Higher temperatures and increased humidity have been reported to cause additional swelling and discomfort for people with lymphoedema, leading to reduced compliance with compression garment use and poorly managed symptoms.

Climate change is the biggest threat to human health this century with many known direct and indirect impacts. Increased adverse weather events and rising global temperatures are well documented. It is therefore imperative to understand the extent to which the climate impacts lymphoedema, in order to adapt our treatment approach and develop new technologies for the future. Whilst we know from clinical experience that patients with lymphoedema experience increased difficulties in warmer and humid temperatures, the extent of the impact and the recommended counter measures remain unclear. This presentation will highlight the outcomes of a PhD study which is exploring this theme from both a qualitative and a quantitative perspective. Results from focus groups in Australia and in Germany will be presented along with key outcomes from a large international survey.

Keywords: lymphoedema, climate, compression therapy, research, climate change

Biography

Susan Witt is an occupational therapist and lymphoedema therapist, originally from Australia but now living in Germany. She works at the Földi clinic as a therapist and research assistant and is completing her PhD with Flinders University in Australia, under the supervision of Prof. Neil Piller.