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PROFILE

Peter Glasser

Developing a Successful Treatment for Lymphedema

by Paul Gains

Millions of Americans suffer from lymphedema, a debilitating condition in which lymphatic fluid accumulates in the interstitial tissues. Lymphedema causes massive swelling, usually in the arms and legs. Left untreated, it can lead to hypertension and stroke.

Lymphedema sufferers are often sent home and told to apply bandages and compression garments to the extremities. Although this helps to squeeze fluids out and reduce the swelling, it is a temporary fix at best.

Fortunately, a holistic treatment pioneered by Peter Glasser, a North Carolina-based massage therapist, is proving successful with lymphedema patients from across the continent. The treatment involves the administration of supplements and herbs, most notably horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), in combination with a specific massage technique called manual lymph drainage.



Peter Glasser

AN ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY

In 1995, Glasser moved to Asheville, NC, where he opened a practice called the Ultimate Health Center (www.uhealth.net) with his wife, Diana Brady, a holistic nutritionist. A New Jersey native, Glasser learned about lymphedema while studying massage, and became intrigued by the lack of information about the condition.

"I saw a news broadcast one evening on lymphedema and they mentioned massage as part of the treatment program. It's called manual lymph drainage and it piqued my interest," Glasser recalls. "I called and asked what lymphedema was and what they knew about it. I went for an interview and then for two weeks of training to be certified in the treatment of lymphedema."



Glasser, a licensed massage therapist, has established himself as something of an authority on lymphedema, which has a variety of origins. It can be caused by a genetic condition, though some people develop secondary lymphedema because of surgery, radiation treatment, or injury. In many cases, it is directly related to cancer surgery.

"A lot of women get it when they have breast cancer and their lymph nodes are removed," Glasser explains. "With radiation treatment, there's more stress on your lymphatic system. You see it with hysterectomies, which can cause lymphedema in the legs. In men, prostate surgery can cause it in the legs. These are the main causes of secondary lymphedema."

While treatment centers have sprung up around the country in recent years, Glasser believes his is the only facility that specializes in the holistic treatment of lymphedema. He criticizes the mainstream medical establishment for failing, through either ignorance or complacency, to warn patients that surgery might cause the condition.

"It's a case of the lesser of two evils," Glasser says. "Many patients complain that their doctors never tell them there is a possibility they will develop lymphedema. When they come back and complain to their doctors, they're told, 'you're still alive, aren't you?'"

"The doctors should be up front and tell patients that there is that possibility, but a lot of doctors don't know much about lymphedema. There is very little training on the lymphatic system in medical school, so a lot of doctors don't know what to do for the swelling. People will go out and get a pump or get compression garments, and they're told to wait and it will get better."

As Glasser's hands-on experience in treating lymphedema has grown, so has his practice. In addition to his wife, the Ultimate

Health Center now employs several other massage therapists, a physiotherapist, a physician's assistant, and a medical doctor who doubles as the center's medical director.

"I was always interested in finding a better way for patients," Glasser recalls. "I would hear a lot of complaints from patients on the amount of bandaging they had to do every night on their arms and legs. They didn't want to do it for the rest of their lives.

"I started reading more about herbs and came across an article in The Lancet about horse chestnut being used in Germany and Austria for varicose veins and hemorrhoids. I thought that if it could improve blood vessels, then it could help lymphatic vessels. So I started experimenting with horse chestnut extract, which was then still hard to find in this country. Soon I found that my patients' conditions were improving."

Life Extension products figure prominently in Glasser's practice. He recommends that his patients take two capsules of Venotone (horse chestnut) with a quarter teaspoon of Life Extension's Rutin Powder twice a day. This strengthens their lymphatic vessels and helps reduce the edema.

"We also recommend Life Extension's two-per-day multi-vitamin and Super Digestive Enzymes, which help reduce fibrotic tissue and edema," says Glasser.



PATIENTS' LIVES TRANSFORMED

The Ultimate Health Center's reputation has spread quickly throughout the US. Although most of the center's patients are from North Carolina and bordering states, Glasser has treated lymphedema sufferers from as far away as California and Canada.

"I had lymphedema for almost 20 years, but the doctors couldn't tell what it was," says 52-year-old Susan Philips, one of the center's long-time patients. "Finally in 1999, I went to a major teaching hospital in Winston-Salem, NC. They started working on me and could get the liquids squeezed out of my legs, but my legs would fill right back up. I had gotten to the point where I could hardly walk. My calves were larger than my waist."

Philips was referred to the hospital's occupational therapy department, whose staff was well aware of Glasser and his treatment protocol. But getting an appointment at the Ultimate Health Center proved difficult, as Glasser was taking on more patients.

"He had a long waiting list, so I originally saw him in July 1999 but didn't start manual lymph drainage treatment until that October," says Philips. "I did begin taking horse chestnut in July. I had already lost inches of swelling off my legs by the time I saw him in October, just from taking the supplements."

Like many of his other patients, Philips is now on what Glasser calls a maintenance program, which involves taking horse chestnut daily. She also applies it to her skin each day. While she originally took treatments at the center six times a week, those have been scaled back to twice a month.



Over the years, Philips has lost about 150 pounds. Glasser believes that this has extended her life. Philips says that while her legs have returned to normal size, they are still deformed from enduring 20 years of lymphedema. Doctors now believe her condition is hereditary, since her younger brother and sister also suffer from lymphedema.

Another long-time patient, 69-year-old Vicki Stokes, developed lymphedema after a radical hysterectomy. Doctors discovered she had cervical cancer, thus necessitating the surgery. According to Stokes, however, the doctors went too far.

"My oncologist was not familiar with the lymphatic system at all," Stokes explains. "I diagnosed myself. He removed an unreasonable amount of lymph nodes from each side, saying that he was trying to prevent a recurrence.

"So I got on the Internet and found out about lymphedema. I belong to an online support group with people from Israel, India, South America, and all over the world. That's where we share information. The doctors remove lymph nodes. Mine were all healthy. That causes lymphedema."

Twice a year, she makes the journey to Asheville from her home in San Diego for a week-long maintenance treatment, and she showers praise on Glasser and his team.

Despite his success to date, Glasser continually seeks ways to improve his treatments. Although he tells patients to follow his protocol for six months to a year, he often sees them improve much more quickly. He ascribes that rapid improvement to the quality of the horse chestnut and other supplements he prescribes.

“I started using Rutin Powder along with the horse chestnut,” Glasser explains. “Rutin is a bioflavonoid that works well in combination with horse chestnut. When I first started, horse chestnut was an extract. I would tell patients to take 30 drops with a little bit of water, twice a day. Then it started coming in capsules, so I started advising patients to take one capsule, twice a day, and I found that it works better.”

Because horse chestnut is a powerful herb that can cause nausea and other gastrointestinal problems, Glasser advises his patients to take it with meals. Glasser recommends that patients who are already on blood thinners to forego horse chestnut. He also advises pregnant women not to use horse chestnut.

As Glasser and his staff continue to treat lymphedema patients, they are learning more about its prognosis and adjusting their treatment protocols accordingly. Glasser believes there are millions of people with lymphedema who can be treated with horse chestnut and relieved of this crippling condition. While his patients have Glasser to thank for regaining their health, he is quick to share the credit.

“The way my wife and I see it, Life Extension is the leader in the philosophy that aging and disease can be prevented or corrected,” Glasser says. “That’s a philosophy that I happen to share.”

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