

Fluid Retention (Oedema)

a brief guide

This is a problem which may happen to people with ME for a variety of reasons, and there are various steps you can take to help, according to your particular situation.

Some of us are prone to fluid retention in very hot weather, whilst others notice it as a result of changing hormone levels e.g. in pregnancy or the menopause – this explains why the problem can be more widespread amongst women than amongst men. It is a symptom of the condition of the body, rather than an illness in itself.

What is fluid retention?

Fluid retention simply means that water is getting stuck in the body and there are various possible causes for this.

The body consists of up to 75% water, which is held within and outside the body cells and in the blood plasma. The fluid that circulates in the body is a mixture of waste products, minerals and other nutrients, plus a wide variety of chemicals that the body needs to operate its daily metabolism. Water gets into the system with the foods we eat and the liquids we drink. Water leaves the system through the kidneys, bowel, lungs, and skin. The balance of fluids and minerals in our bodies is maintained by a process of osmosis. Osmosis is the process whereby liquid containing things dissolved in it will always tend to pass through a membrane from the side where the concentration is weaker to the side where the concentration is greater. Osmosis explains why our fingers go wrinkly after soaking in a warm bath – the water is passing from the side with the lower concentration of minerals (the bath water) to the side with the higher concentration of minerals (the body fluid).



This is why the mineral balance of the body is linked to fluid retention. But there are other causes too.

What causes it?

If the system goes wrong and fluid retention appears, then remember that there are various illness which may cause it and so the condition should always be taken to a doctor (unless brought on by extremely hot weather, or a pre-menstrual state etc). These include:

- Hormonal imbalances such as low thyroid levels or an imbalance involving the hormones produced by the kidneys and nervous system, all of which affect the size and absorption capacity of the blood vessels

- Lack of minerals in the blood stream which means that fluid does not pass through cell membranes
- Excess salt or sugar which has the effect of pulling water into the cells
- Substances such as drugs, cigarette by-products and other manufactured chemicals which have a similar effect because the body tries to dilute them
- A heart problem can obstruct flow through the veins and force fluid back through the walls of the tiny blood vessels
- Food allergy may create a toxic state within the tissues that causes water to be 'pulled in' for dilution
- Dehydration. If not enough water is taken in, the body cells attract fluid into themselves and when replete build up an impermeable outer wall to protect themselves from further fluid loss. Where there is not enough water circulating in the system, hormonal reactions trigger the storage of even more fluid in the body tissues, particularly the fatty tissues, causing further water retention

Lifestyle factors

Diet plays a large part in giving the body enough water to function properly. Vegetables, fruits, and carbohydrates have much more water in them than fats and proteins. Salads and fresh fruit have a similar water content to the body itself. How much salt you use will make a difference, since it causes your body to retain water. Physical activity is also relevant, because of the sweating and breathing connection. A substantial amount of water is lost though breathing even during a good night's sleep!

What can I do to help?

First rule out serious hormonal conditions and also heart, liver or kidney disorders.

If you are taking medication, consider whether the condition could be a side-effect

Review the diet. Perhaps salt and processed foods (containing lots of hidden salt and sugar) need to be drastically cut down. Make sure you are eating a balanced and varied diet and consider a multi-mineral/vitamin supplement.

Drink plenty of water – do not allow yourself to become thirsty.

Avoid diuretics ("water tablets") if possible as in the long term they may not be helpful. One of their effects is to leach potassium from the body.

Investigate possible food allergies.



Homoeopathic and herbal preparations and also appropriate massage can be very helpful for this condition. Consult a properly qualified practitioner. Over-the-counter fluid retention remedies are not recommended as these can disturb the metabolic balance and make things worse.

Are there any natural alternative remedies?

Yes! In particular there are many foods which are natural diuretics and will help fluid to be released from the tissues.

- The first step to take when improving the diet is to reduce the intake of table salt and salty foods, such as pickled and convenience foods, crisps, salted nuts etc. Check for the appearance of the word 'sodium' on your breakfast cereals.
- Drink enough water – this specifically helps with fluid retention.
- Herbal teas which help the body get rid of water are dandelion, lovage, rosemary, parsley and nettle. Of these, **Dandelion** is a favourite remedy for water retention. 10-20 drops of tincture in a glass of water would be more powerful than the herb tea. It helps reduce the swelling and may be used for as long as you like. Dandelion not only helps remove excess fluid from the cells, it may support the kidneys, adrenals and liver, and increase the digestibility of food.
- All fruits and vegetables encourage the body to get rid of fluid because they contain potassium, which flushes out both excess salt and water. Bananas, beetroot and tomatoes are especially rich in potassium.
- Other foods with a diuretic effect include Citrus fruit, melon, cucumber, watercress, carrots, salad leaves, peaches, cherries, pears, apple, cucumber and especially celery.
- Refined carbohydrates such as white bread, pasta, biscuits and cakes all aggravate the problem. Choose whole grain varieties.
- Evening Primrose Oil can have a beneficial effect on fluid retention, especially if it is hormone related.
- Make sure you are getting enough Essential Fatty Acids which are needed to ensure the proper permeability of the cell wall (see above). There should be oily fish and/or seeds such as linseeds, flax, pumpkin and sunflower in your regular diet.
- Lymphatic drainage massage consists of repeated light quick strokes, always in the direction of blood flow towards the heart (UP the arms and legs), followed by slower relaxing strokes in the same direction. It is possible to perform this on one's own arms and legs if a therapist is not available!

Always remember, though, that fluid retention is not an illness itself but is often more properly considered a SYMPTOM. So if you have alarming symptoms do tell your GP about it, whilst seriously reviewing the lifestyle factors which may have brought it on.

