

Swelling Stinks

Swelling is something that is often overlooked, and misunderstood. Once understanding the physiologic process, and the reasoning behind swelling, one can appreciate the human body, and furthermore know how to treat pathological swelling. Swelling can be either traumatic or non-traumatic. Traumatic swelling occurs after most injuries which will be discussed in the article. Non-Traumatic swelling is swelling that exists without any forcible injury causing it. Non-traumatic swelling often occurs in the arms and legs and is often a systemic problem which a physician visit is necessary.

Two main types of traumatic swelling exist: effusion and edema. Effusion refers to swelling inside a joint which is more indicative for an internal joint problem. The fluid is bloody in nature, and causes pain. Edema refers to swelling outside a joint. The most common area to tell the difference is the knee. If you press down on the knee cap into your knee joint, if it feels like you are pressing on jello under your knee cap, it is most likely effusion. Conversely, people often have pockets of fluid below the knee more towards the bony prominences in their lower leg, which is most often edema.

Swelling is a normal physiologic response from your body. Whenever an injury occurs, your body has an inflammatory response. Blood is sent to the area with the intent to initiate the healing process. Blood will rush to the injured area, and go to your smaller blood vessels called capillaries. In the smaller blood vessels, the fluid that makes the swelling is made. This fluid is squeezed out of the blood and released on the injured tissue. The fluid contains microcellular organisms that assist in the healing phase. These will help eat away at any bad tissue, and promote the normal healing process. Short term swelling promotes normal healing, but long term swelling will cause larger problems. Long term swelling will promote to break down of muscle and cartilage, because the microcellular organisms will begin fighting the wrong tissue.

The best way to treat swelling is to remember the RICE acronym (Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation). Although it is essential in the healing process, it is pathological if long lasting. Typically, when an injury has occurred, it is suggested to RICE for 20 minutes on and 20 minutes off. If long lasting swelling exists, you should consult your physician. Swelling that occurs for no traumatic reason, for instance in the lower leg or arms, can be a larger systemic condition which a physician visit is needed.

The above is intended as general information only. Be sure to contact your physician for advice or your own specific medical problems. Have a question? Write to Questions from the Field, Gananda-Walworth Physical Therapy and Village Fitness, PO Box 162, Macedon, NY 14502, or send e-mail to gwpt@rochester.rr.com.