

## UAE | Health

### Living with lymphedema

# Living with lymphedema

Dubai : When Raja A.F. was referred to **Dr Mohan Rangaswamy**, Specialist Plastic Surgeon, by a colleague at Welcare Hospital in Dubai in June this year, she had tried a variety of treatments in several hospitals, both within and outside the UAE.

Sharmila Dhal, Senior Reporter

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**XPRESS**

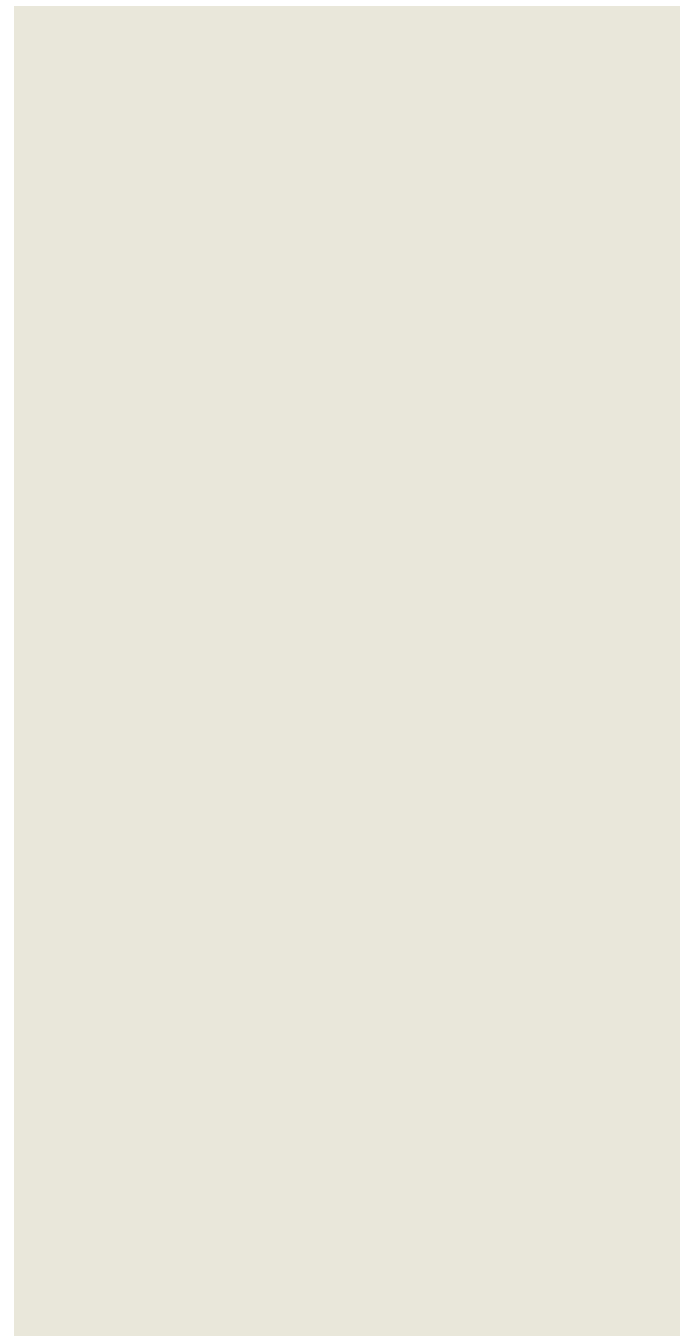


Image Credit: supplied photo

The surgery lasted six hours by the end of which Raja's weight came down from 180kg to 125kg.

A detailed investigation revealed that the cause for her lymphedema was a rare condition called lymphedema prcox where the lymph vessels have disappeared at puberty or at 20-30 years of age due to unknown reasons.

## Extreme challenge



**Dr Rangaswamy** said the lymphedema had reached extreme proportions (Stage 4).

He was convinced that Raja needed surgical debulking, a form of reconstructive plastic surgery. He had ample experience in treating lymphedema, gathered for the most part at the Lymphology Clinic of the premier All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi where he worked for six years earlier.

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The first task at hand was to make the limb softer with a week of intensive pressure bandaging and pneumatic pump treatment to compress it and raise the pressure of the tissue fluid to push it inward into the veins.

Six litres of excess lymph fluid and 5.5 litres of fat were then removed through liposuction, followed by removal of 4.6kg of excess skin and other tissues through the actual surgery called debulking.

The entire process lasted six hours. By the end of it all, Raja's weight came down to 138kg from 180kg. Liposuction was done by two surgeons working simultaneously using blunt cannulae and suction pumps. To-and-fro movements made in the tissue planes selectively removed the fat, leading to further softening and reduction of the size of the limb.

## Debulking



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"The debulking was facilitated by combining it with liposuction, so the patient did not lose much blood. Otherwise, these tissues bleed a lot," said Dr Rangaswamy.

"As it was difficult to hold the tissues up for surgery, we had to devise special instruments," said **Dr Rangaswamy** who used a myomectomy screw, which is normally used to hold the uterus during fibroid removal. A patient hoist, which is used to lift heavy patients, was employed to raise the limb as it was very heavy. A large foam incline plane was designed by a local company to enable the limb to be elevated above heart level.

He said the debulking had made Raja's leg suitable for life-long management. But the excess protein-rich fluid would have to be forcibly returned to the blood circulation every day. For this, she will have to use compression bandages, custom-made stockings and pneumatic pumps on a regular basis.

### What is lymphedema?

When blood is pumped by the heart, it reaches the tissues through the arterial system which ends in filters called capillaries. Here, the nutrition and oxygen-rich fluid is filtered out at one end to carry the ingredients to cells and tissues. The filtered fluid then returns to the capillaries at the other end which form veins and bring the blood back to the heart.

About one-two per cent of protein-rich fluid (lymph) that has leaked out of the capillaries stays back in the tissues. It returns to the veins through fine vessels called lymphatics, but if they are blocked, it accumulates in the tissue spaces leading to a swelling called lymphedema. The skin becomes rough and thick with mushroom-like nodules and cracks resulting in an elephant-like leg.

### What are its causes?

The commonest global cause is filariasis or a parasitic disease spread by mosquitoes. Upper limbs may also swell following surgery or radiation treatment for breast cancer. But a rare cause is a condition called lymphedema procox - the lymph vessels disappear at puberty or at 20-30 years of age due to unknown reasons.

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Victims usually suffer from heavy weight, unsightly appearance and interference with daily activity. They suffer from painful infections, or lymphangitis, in the swollen limb leading to fever.

### Can it be cured?

Lymphedema can be controlled but not cured.

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