



## Clinical Guide: Edema vs. Lymphedema

*Identifying the root cause of lower extremity swelling.*

### 1. Presentation & Characteristics

The physical appearance and "feel" of the limb provide the most immediate clues.

Feature	Cardiovascular Insufficiency (CVI)	Lymphedema
<b>Pitting</b>	Usually pits easily (soft edema).	Pitting is common in early stages; becomes non-pitting/fibrotic later.
<b>Symmetry</b>	Often bilateral and symmetrical.	Frequently asymmetrical; can be unilateral.
<b>Stemmer's Sign</b>	<b>Negative</b> (Skin on the base of the second toe can be pinched).	<b>Positive</b> (Skin on the base of the second toe cannot be pinched/lifted).
<b>Foot Involvement</b>	Often spares the feet; swelling stops at the ankle.	<b>Foot involvement is hallmark;</b> "squaring" of the toes and dorsal foot swelling.
<b>Elevation</b>	Swelling often improves or resolves overnight with elevation.	Elevation has minimal effect, especially in later stages.

## 2. Visual Indicators & Skin Changes

- **Cardiovascular/Venous:** Look for "hemosiderin staining" (reddish-brown staining of the lower legs), varicose veins, and stasis dermatitis. In advanced cases, the leg may take on an "inverted champagne bottle" shape (lipodermatosclerosis).
- **Lymphedema:** Look for skin thickening (hyperkeratosis), papillomatosis (wart-like growths), and deep skin folds at the ankle or wrist. The limb often appears "woody" or firm.

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## 3. Why the Distinction Matters

Misdiagnosis often leads to ineffective treatment. While diuretics are a standard frontline treatment for cardiovascular edema, they are generally **ineffective** for lymphedema and may actually concentrate the protein-rich fluid, worsening the tissue fibrosis over time.

## 4. Recommended Action Plan

1. **Rule out DVT or Acute Cardiac Failure:** If swelling is sudden, painful, or accompanied by shortness of breath.
2. **The Stemmer Test:** Perform this quick physical exam at the second toe or finger.
3. **Referral:**
  - If **CVI** is suspected: Refer for venous duplex ultrasound and vascular consult.
  - If **Lymphedema** is suspected: Refer to a Certified Lymphedema Therapist (CLT) for Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT) and compression garment fitting.

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## Lymphedema Association of Nova Scotia

*For more information on local referral pathways or provider education, visit [lymphedemanovascotia.com](http://lymphedemanovascotia.com) or contact [lymphedemanovascotia@gmail.com](mailto:lymphedemanovascotia@gmail.com)*