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What Does Fat Accumulation in the Legs Mean?

When adiposity in the legs reveals lipedema, not obesity

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ABSTRACT

This text examines the possible causes of fat accumulation in the lower limbs, focusing on lipedema, a chronic vascular disease frequently confused with obesity. Lipedema is described as a condition of genetic origin that affects almost exclusively women, characterized by symmetrical adiposity in the legs and ankles and triggered by phases of hormonal imbalance such as puberty, pregnancy and menopause. Symptoms such as swelling, frequent bruising, pain and tenderness to the touch are listed. The article distinguishes lipedema from lymphedema, linked to fluid accumulation from lymphatic failure, and from obesity, which has dietary causes and a generalized distribution. It also addresses diagnosis, made by exclusion by the vascular surgeon, and treatment, which includes exercise, a healthy diet, drainage, compression, medication and, as a last resort, surgery.

KEYWORDS: *lipedema; leg fat; lymphedema; obesity; vascular disease; vascular surgery*

Fat accumulation in the legs is almost always understood as obesity. This interpretation is not entirely wrong; however, it is not the only cause of fat that settles specifically in the lower limbs. **Lipedema**, for instance, is a common disease, though poorly known and diagnosed, responsible for this excess of adipose tissue in the legs. In what follows, we will discuss lipedema in more detail, the relationship between the disease and accumulated fat, and how to identify and treat this problem.

Fat accumulation in the legs: what could it be?

When we speak of symptomatic fat that settles primarily in the legs, we can already rule out any connection to obesity. This is because, when a person is overweight, fat is deposited throughout the body in a generalized way. When it predominantly affects the legs, this adiposity may be a sign of vascular disease, such as **lipedema**, for example. Another problem that also affects the legs and is confused with lipedema is **lymphedema**. However, lymphedema has nothing to do with fat accumulation, but rather with excess fluid and, therefore, swelling, as we will see below.

What is lipedema?

Lipedema is considered a **chronic vascular disease** that affects essentially women and is characterized by the accumulation of fat in the legs and ankles. The fat settles symmetrically, that is, in both legs at the same time. Because of this, the body of a woman who has lipedema takes on a disproportionate shape. The lower part is wider and larger than the upper part, made up of the trunk and arms, although the arms may also be affected by lipedema. Of genetic origin, lipedema usually appears after certain phases of a woman's life marked by hormonal imbalance, such as puberty, pregnancy and menopause. Lipedema is easily confused with obesity and, because of this mistake, many women live with the problem without knowing exactly what it is. The disease requires specific treatment and, for that reason, must be diagnosed correctly.

Symptoms of lipedema

The main symptom of lipedema is the symmetrical accumulation of fat in the legs, leaving the body disproportionate. In addition, the following may also arise:

- Swelling, especially when the woman spends a long time standing;
- Frequent bruising, with no specific cause;
- Presence of fatty nodules;
- Cellulite;
- Pain in the legs and knees, even at rest;
- An area that is tender to the touch;
- An area with a lower temperature than the rest of the body;
- Loss of mobility, especially when the disease is at a more advanced stage.

It is important to remember that these symptoms may come and go frequently and do not always appear all at the same time.

Lipedema vs. Lymphedema: differences

Despite their similar names, these two diseases carry some differences between them. The main one is what gives rise to the increase in leg volume. In lipedema, there is an accumulation of diseased fat in the legs and ankles and, in some cases, in the arms. In lymphedema, there is an excess of fluid due to the poor functioning of the lymphatic system, causing edema or swelling. This increase in volume also differs between the two conditions. In lipedema, the fat affects both legs proportionally, whereas lymphedema may affect a single limb, leaving it larger and wider than the other. While lipedema is genetic in origin, lymphedema is caused by a failure in the lymphatic system, which is responsible for the flow of lymph through the tissues. Poor circulation leads to the accumulation of fluid and causes bodily swelling. Another difference between these two diseases is the triggering factor. In lipedema, the woman is already born with the problem, which develops due to specific hormonal changes. Lymphedema, on the other hand, may arise after erysipelas, surgeries for the treatment of breast cancer, or when the individual goes a long time without moving, as is the case with bedridden people or those in a postoperative period.

Lipedema vs. Obesity: differences

Lipedema is also frequently confused with obesity, including by some physicians, and this considerably hinders diagnosis and treatment, which are essential to the patient's quality of life. Obesity is considered a chronic disease whose main symptom is the accumulation of fat throughout the body. The cause of the disease is mainly an irregular diet, with an excess of sweets, fried foods and processed foods, combined with a sedentary lifestyle. This means that maintaining a healthy diet and engaging in physical activity is generally enough to keep obesity at bay. The same does not happen with lipedema. Physical exercise and a good diet can help reduce body fat levels, but they will not eliminate lipedema, since, as we have seen, it is a genetic problem. Another difference is that obesity can appear at any stage of a person's life, whereas lipedema appears at specific moments in a woman's life, such as adolescence, pregnancy and menopause. In men, lipedema is very rare.

How to diagnose lipedema

When fat accumulation in the legs is also accompanied by some of the symptoms listed above, it is essential to schedule a consultation with a vascular surgeon. This is the specialist for this type of problem, who can make the correct diagnosis and recommend the best treatment. It is also important to be aware that a woman may suffer from all of the diseases listed here: lipedema, lymphedema and obesity. The presence of one does not exclude the others, but all must be identified and treated according to their own characteristics. The diagnosis of lipedema is made by ruling out other diseases and observing the symptoms, in addition to assessing the patient's lifestyle habits. There is no specific test that can confirm the disease.

Treatment of the disease

Although it has no cure, lipedema can be treated. As a chronic disease, its symptoms may accompany the individual throughout life, but the discomfort is reduced by adopting certain practices, such as:

- Daily physical exercise, preferably aerobic, which helps with weight loss and activates circulation;
- A healthy diet focused on natural foods;
- Lymphatic drainage;
- Compression garments to reduce swelling and relieve pain;

The vascular physician may also prescribe medication and, as a last resort, recommend surgical treatment with the aspiration of the diseased fat. This is a technique that does not eliminate the problem but reduces the discomfort it causes. As we have seen, fat accumulation in the legs may indicate several diseases. However, if it is accompanied by other characteristic symptoms, it is a strong indication of vascular disease, such as lipedema. The recommendation is to seek a vascular physician to diagnose and treat the problem so that the disease does not progress and the patient does not have to suffer so much from the discomfort it causes. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YtTL-ClpXCQ

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