

Edema Pathophysiology and Clinical Management: Student Handout

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EDEMA PATHOPHYSIOLOGY AND CLINICAL MANAGEMENT

PA/Medical Student Handout

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this module, you will be able to:

1. **Explain the Starling principle** and how alterations in Starling forces lead to edema formation
 2. **Identify the major pathophysiologic mechanisms** causing edema in clinical practice (cardiac, venous, lymphatic, renal)
 3. **Distinguish between unilateral and bilateral edema** patterns and their clinical significance
 4. **Differentiate between pitting and non-pitting edema** and what this tells you about the underlying cause
 5. **Apply evidence-based diuretic pharmacology** including loop diuretic mechanisms and albumin co-administration
 6. **Manage medication-induced edema** and recognize the most common culprits
 7. **Understand the gut edema phenomenon** and why some diuretics work better in heart failure
 8. **Counsel patients** on non-pharmacologic edema management
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SECTION 1: FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS

The Starling Principle

The movement of fluid across capillary membranes depends on **four main forces**:

Force	Direction	Effect
Capillary Hydrostatic Pressure (Pc)	OUT of capillary	Favors filtration
Interstitial Hydrostatic Pressure (Pi)	INTO capillary	Favors reabsorption
Plasma Colloid Osmotic Pressure (Πc)	INTO capillary	Favors reabsorption
Interstitial Colloid Osmotic Pressure (Πi)	OUT of capillary	Favors filtration

The Starling Equation:

$$\text{Net Filtration} = K_f[(P_c - P_i) - \sigma(\Pi_c - \Pi_i)]$$

Key Concept: Edema forms when net filtration exceeds lymphatic drainage capacity.

Modified Starling Principle (Recent Understanding)

The endothelial glycocalyx acts as a molecular sieve, creating local oncotic gradients rather than simple bulk flow. This explains why edema can form even when plasma albumin is only mildly decreased.

SECTION 2: MAJOR CAUSES OF EDEMA

1. ELEVATED CAPILLARY HYDROSTATIC PRESSURE

Venous Insufficiency (CVI) - Valve incompetence sustained venous hypertension - Leads to capillary dilation, increased permeability, microangiopathy - Red flags: Varicose veins, hemosiderin staining (brown discoloration), skin thickening - Distribution: Usually bilateral, worse at end of day, improves with elevation

Right Heart Dysfunction - Tricuspid regurgitation elevated central venous pressure - Pulmonary hypertension RV strain - Results in systemic congestion (peripheral edema, ascites, hepatomegaly) - Distinguish from LHF by presence of elevated JVD with hepatomegaly

2. DECREASED PLASMA ONCOTIC PRESSURE

Severe Hypoalbuminemia (Albumin <2.0 g/dL) - Nephrotic syndrome (proteinuria >3.5 g/day) - Severe liver disease (cirrhosis) - Malnutrition - Massive GI losses

Clinical Pearl: Mild hypoalbuminemia alone rarely causes edema; usually requires additional factors like venous insufficiency or salt retention.

3. LYMPHATIC OBSTRUCTION

Primary Lymphedema - Congenital lymphatic malformation - Non-pitting edema that persists with elevation - Positive Stemmer sign (inability to pinch dorsal foot skin)

Secondary Lymphedema - Malignancy with lymph node involvement - Post-surgical lymph node dissection - Radiation therapy

4. INCREASED CAPILLARY PERMEABILITY

Acute Inflammation/Infection - Cellulitis □ warm, erythematous, tender edema - Requires fever and systemic signs

Acute Kidney Injury - Sudden onset with oliguria - Associated laboratory abnormalities

SECTION 3: CLINICAL ASSESSMENT

History Taking

Ask about: - **Onset:** Acute (hours-days) vs. chronic (weeks-months) - **Location:** Bilateral vs. unilateral - **Diurnal pattern:** Worse in evening, improves overnight (suggests dependency) - **Medications:** NSAIDs, CCBs (amlodipine), corticosteroids, gabapentin - **Associated symptoms:** Dyspnea, orthopnea, PND (heart failure), pain/warmth (DVT), erythema (cellulitis) - **Risk factors:** Recent surgery/immobilization, malignancy, pregnancy, heart/kidney/liver disease

Physical Examination

Inspect: - Distribution (bilateral vs. unilateral) - Skin color and texture - Presence of varicose veins or skin changes - Measure circumference at standardized points (mid-calf, ankle)

Palpate: - **Pitting vs. Non-Pitting:** Press thumb for 5 seconds - **Pitting** = indentation persists (fluid-related: venous, cardiac, renal) - **Non-pitting** = no lasting indentation (lymphedema, lipodermatosclerosis) - Temperature (warm in cellulitis/DVT, cold in arterial insufficiency) - Pulses (dorsalis pedis, posterior tibial) - Stemmer sign (test for lymphedema)

Special Tests: - Homan's sign (calf pain with dorsiflexion) - low sensitivity/specificity - Trendelenburg test (for venous insufficiency)

SECTION 4: MEDICATION-INDUCED EDEMA

Most Common Medications

Drug Class	Mechanism	Onset	Severity	Notes
Amlodipine (CCB)	Precapillary vasodilation	Days-weeks	Common (~16%)	Dose-related; consider alternatives

Drug Class	Mechanism	Onset	Severity	Notes
NSAIDs	<input type="checkbox"/> Natriuresis via COX inhibition	Within 1 week	Usually mild	Worse in elderly/renal disease
Corticosteroids	Salt/water retention	Days	Variable	“Moon facies” + edema
Thiazolidinediones	PPAR-γ activation <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> tubular sodium reabsorption	Weeks	2-5% incidence	Higher with insulin combo
Gabapentin/Pregabalin	Endothelial capillary vasodilation (similar to CCBs)	Weeks	1-10%	Can affect gait
Dopamine agonists	Unknown	Weeks-months	Rare but documented	~6% in one series
Hormonal contraceptives	<input type="checkbox"/> Vascular permeability	Variable	Usually mild	Consider alternative contraception

Clinical Pearl: Always obtain a complete medication list when evaluating new-onset edema.

SECTION 5: DIURETIC PHARMACOLOGY IN HEART FAILURE

Loop Diuretics (First-Line)

Mechanism of Action: - Inhibit Na-K-2Cl cotransporter in **thick ascending limb of Henle’s loop** - Prevent sodium reabsorption increased sodium excretion - Require **active tubular secretion** via organic anion transporters - Must achieve minimum threshold concentration in tubular lumen

Common Agents: - **Furosemide** (Lasix): 40-80 mg IV/PO daily; variable bioavailability - **Bumetanide** (Bumex): More predictable absorption; better in gut edema - **Torsemide**: Longest half-life; most consistent absorption

The Albumin-Furosemide Problem

Why Albumin Matters: - Furosemide is **>95% protein-bound** to albumin in plasma - The albumin-bound fraction is what reaches the kidney for secretion - In **hypoalbuminemia** (albumin <2.0 g/dL): - More free (unbound) furosemide diffuses into tissues - Less drug reaches the proximal tubule for active secretion - Renal metabolic clearance of furosemide increases - Result: **Diuretic resistance**

When to Add Albumin with Furosemide

Evidence-Based Recommendations:

Albumin Level	Recommendation	Dosing
<2.0 g/dL	STRONG consideration	25-50g albumin + 40-80mg furosemide; mix or give sequentially
2.0-2.5 g/dL	MODERATE consideration if inadequate response	>30g albumin dose needed; consider trial
>2.5 g/dL	Unlikely to benefit	Optimize furosemide dose/route first

Administration Methods: 1. **Pre-mixing:** Mix 40 mg furosemide with 25g albumin (20% solution), incubate 30 min before IV infusion 2. **Sequential:** Infuse 25-50g albumin over 1-2 hours, then give IV furosemide 3. **Simultaneous:** Separate IV lines

Monitoring: Check urine output hourly × 6-8 hours; measure weight at 24 hours; repeat if good initial response.

SECTION 6: GUT EDEMA AND DIURETIC ABSORPTION

The Gut Edema Phenomenon

In advanced heart failure, **intestinal wall edema impairs drug absorption:**

- Increased bowel wall thickness (measured on ultrasound)
- Reduced splanchnic perfusion
- Increased intestinal permeability
- **Clinical consequence:** Oral diuretics may fail despite adequate dosing

Signs of Significant Gut Edema

- Poor response to oral diuretics
- Colon wall thickness ≥ 3 mm on ultrasound
- Abdominal distension, dyspepsia, nausea

Solution: Route Selection

Situation	Recommendation
Gut edema suspected	Switch to IV diuretics

Situation	Recommendation
Failed oral therapy	Bumetanide or torsemide preferred (better absorption)
Normal gut function	Oral furosemide acceptable

Why Bumetanide Works Better: - 80% bioavailability (vs. 40% for furosemide) - Passive lipid diffusion (not dependent on active secretion) - Effective even with mucosal edema

SECTION 7: UNILATERAL VS. BILATERAL EDEMA

Unilateral Edema (Single Leg)

Think about LOCAL causes: - **DVT** (most critical - rule out first with duplex ultrasound) - Cellulitis (acute onset, erythema, warmth, fever) - Lymphedema (non-pitting, Stemmer sign positive) - Baker's cyst (popliteal cyst; may mimic DVT) - Recent surgery/trauma in that limb - External compression (pregnancy iliac vein compression)

Diagnostic Approach: 1. **Duplex ultrasound** gold standard for DVT 2. If negative, consider CT/MRI for other causes 3. Labs if systemic disease suspected

Bilateral Edema (Both Legs)

Think about SYSTEMIC causes: - **Heart failure** (most common; look for orthopnea, PND, JVD) - **Venous insufficiency** (bilateral CVI from prolonged immobility) - **Hypoalbuminemia** (nephrotic syndrome, cirrhosis) - **Renal failure** (salt retention + reduced protein) - **Medication-induced** (NSAIDs, CCBs)

Diagnostic Approach: 1. BMP (creatinine, albumin) 2. BNP (if heart failure suspected) 3. Urinalysis (proteinuria?) 4. CXR (for pulmonary edema)

SECTION 8: CLINICAL PEARLS

Edema in Heart Failure

The Cardiorenal Connection: - Elevated CVP is MORE important than reduced CO in causing renal dysfunction - Renal "tamponade" = interstitial kidney edema compresses tubules/vessels - **Key finding:** Elevated JVD + hepatomegaly (vs. orthopnea in pulmonary edema)

Edema in Nephrotic Syndrome

- Massive proteinuria (>3.5 g/day) hypoalbuminemia
- Salt retention PLUS oncotic pressure loss
- Non-pitting edema common (more protein loss into interstitium)
- Requires aggressive diuresis + albumin + kidney-protective agents (ACE-I, SGLT2i)

Diuretic Resistance: When to Escalate

1. **Double the loop diuretic dose**
 2. **Add second agent:** Thiazide (if adequate GFR) or potassium-sparing diuretic (unlikely in HF)
 3. **Switch to IV route** (bypass gut absorption)
 4. **Add albumin** if hypoalbuminemic
 5. **Restrict sodium** to <2g/day (educate patient!)
 6. **Fluid restriction** to 1-1.5L/day if severe hyponatremia
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SECTION 9: NON-PHARMACOLOGIC MANAGEMENT

Essential for All Edema Patients

- **Leg elevation** 30-60 minutes, 3-4× daily (helps with dependency edema)
- **Compression stockings** (20-30 mmHg) for venous insufficiency
- **Sodium restriction** (<2 g/day in HF/renal disease)
- **Weight monitoring** (daily in HF; target loss 1-2 lbs/day initially)
- **Exercise** as tolerated (improves venous return via muscle pump)

Specific Conditions

Condition	Key Intervention
Venous insufficiency	Compression stockings + leg elevation + avoid prolonged standing
Lymphedema	Lymph massage + compression + limb elevation; diuretics less effective
Medication-induced	Discontinue drug if possible; allow 1-2 weeks for resolution
DVT	Anticoagulation; compression for post-thrombotic syndrome

PRACTICE QUESTIONS

Question 1: A 68-year-old female with new-onset bilateral leg edema presents to clinic. She has a history of hypertension controlled on amlodipine. Exam shows **pitting bilateral ankle edema**, no JVD, normal S3, clear lungs. Labs show albumin 3.8 g/dL, creatinine 0.9 mg/dL, BNP 50 pg/mL. What is the MOST likely cause?

- A) Congestive heart failure
- B) Medication-induced edema from amlodipine
- C) Nephrotic syndrome
- D) Venous insufficiency

Answer: B - Amlodipine (a dihydropyridine CCB) causes edema in ~10-16% of users via precapillary vasodilation. The normal BNP, clear lungs, and absence of cardiac findings make heart failure unlikely. Normal albumin and creatinine rule out nephrotic syndrome and renal failure. The simultaneous onset with medication use is key.

Question 2: A 54-year-old man with heart failure (EF 35%) is admitted with acute decompensation. He is on furosemide 80 mg PO daily but requires escalation. Labs show albumin 1.9 g/dL, creatinine 1.8 mg/dL, Na⁺ 132 mEq/L. Abdominal exam shows distension and discomfort. Which intervention is MOST appropriate?

- A) Switch to IV furosemide 80 mg daily
- B) IV furosemide 80 mg + 25g albumin
- C) IV bumetanide 2 mg daily
- D) Add a second diuretic (spironolactone)

Answer: B - This patient has: - Severe hypoalbuminemia (albumin <2.0) = poor furosemide protein binding - Likely gut edema (distension, diuretic resistance despite oral therapy) - Reduced renal function (creatinine 1.8) All three factors support **IV furosemide + albumin**. Bumetanide has better bioavailability than IV furosemide but BOTH need albumin in this setting. Spironolactone would worsen hyperkalemia risk.

Question 3: A 32-year-old woman presents with **unilateral LEFT leg edema**, calf pain, warmth, and mild erythema. Vitals are stable, no fever. What is your FIRST diagnostic step?

- A) Measure colon wall thickness with ultrasound
- B) Duplex ultrasound of the left lower extremity
- C) CT angiography (PE protocol)
- D) Empiric antibiotics for cellulitis

Answer: B - Unilateral leg edema with pain and warmth = **DVT until proven otherwise**. Duplex ultrasound is the gold standard (>95% sensitivity/specificity). The erythema and warmth could suggest cellulitis, but DVT is more critical to rule out. If duplex is negative and clinical suspicion remains high for cellulitis, then empiric antibiotics are reasonable.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Edema results from **altered Starling forces** or **overwhelmed lymphatic drainage**
- Furosemide paradoxically worsens** when albumin <2.0 g/dL consider albumin co-administration
- Gut edema** switch oral diuretics to **IV route** or use **bumetanide**
- Medication-induced edema** is common always check the drug list (amlodipine, NSAIDs, steroids)
- Unilateral edema** rule out **DVT** first with duplex ultrasound
- Bilateral edema** think **systemic** (heart failure, renal disease, hypoalbuminemia)

☐ **Non-pitting edema** ☐ consider **lymphedema** (poor response to diuretics, requires compression)

☐ **Sodium restriction + diuretics + elevation** = foundation of edema management

See Also

Related Student Handouts

- CKD Complications
- Nephritic and Nephrotic Syndromes
- Hyponatremia Management
- Diuretics
- Cardiorenal Syndrome

Clinical Content (01-Clinical-Medicine/Nephrology & Cardiology)

- Comprehensive Nephrology Reference
- Electrolyte Disorders Hub
- Essential Renal Laboratory Tests

Butler-COM Resources

- Butler COM - Nephrology Deep Dive
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RELATED CLINICAL NOTES

- Comprehensive Nephrology Reference
 - AKI Workup and Management
 - CKD Staging and Progression
 - Hyponatremia Management in Edematous States
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This handout is designed for PA/medical student education. Always refer to current clinical guidelines and institutional protocols for patient care.