

Anything is possible

What I learned about myself and my lymphedema from completing an Ironman

By Vicki Ferg

In the fall of 2011, when I was 38 years old, I was diagnosed with primary lymphedema in my left leg. I had been recovering from surgery on my right ankle when edema in my left leg spontaneously appeared. After many tests, the diagnosis came and I was devastated. I was fit and healthy, running three or more half marathons a year. I was not prepared to be diagnosed with a chronic, incurable condition nor was I prepared for the physical or emotional effects of lymphedema.

Reading about lymphedema online can be depressing. Many experts tell you the things you can and can't do. I read that land based physical activity should be done only while wearing compression, we should not walk in bare feet, we should not have pedicures. What kind of life is this?

Dr. Elliott Weiss gave me lots of advice, but one piece I really gravitated to was “Live your life,” I don't throw caution to the wind, but I make the best decisions that I can make for me. After five years of living with lymphedema, and going through the process of learning what activities would work for me, I made a decision that I was going to complete an Ironman Triathlon. Because I wanted to live my life.

Every article I read suggested that swimming was an excellent exercise for those with lymphedema. In fact the wetsuit I was required to wear provides a form of

compression. After each training swim, I saw no change in my edema. I always cleaned, moisturized and checked my skin for cuts or scrapes, especially when I was open water swimming (and I was cautious about injuring my feet on rocky shorelines). I have had no issues to this date.

I picked up road biking after the ankle surgery as I was told that running on my ankle would be months away. I needed something with less impact than running, and swimming just wasn't enough for me. I knew that I should do my biking while wearing my compression garment, so that's how I started. I usually wear 40-50 mmHg, but the chaffing was horrible. So, I tried a lighter “over the counter” compression garment, and the chaffing was minimal; I was managing. After every long ride I would notice a small increase in my edema, but the following day my leg would look better than ever. My biggest concern was falling off my bike and scraping my left leg, but I decided again: this is my life and I'm going to live it.

Finally, my running was getting back on track, and my ankle was recovering. I started back very slowly and gently. I had similar issues to cycling with compression—some chaffing made better with a lighter compression garment. Also similarly to cycling, my leg seemed to have a small increased edema immediately following the activity but the next day, like magic,



it looked and felt better. I was also feeling better, getting back to that runners high, and my outlook was improving. I saw that I was doing no harm to my lymph system. Actually, I felt like I was invigorating it.

The next step for me was to put this all together; to see if I could do a triathlon and then maybe the ultimate triathlon—an IRONMAN. The Ironman distance triathlon consists of a 3.8km swim, a 180km bike ride and a 42.2km run. Again I started slowly, completing shorter distance events first; a “sprint” triathlon, then an “Olympic” distance and a half Ironman all before considering the IRONMAN.

As you transition from a swim to a bike ride during these shorter distance events, you are not provided with a place to change. You are expected to wear the garments that you have on under your wetsuit for the entire event. So I started rethinking my use of compression while biking and running. I started practicing biking and running without compression. Interestingly, I found very little difference in the level of edema increase post exercise without compression. After my workouts, however, I was very conscious to immediately head straight home and put on my compression garment. If I did go for a coffee after our run or head out for a bite to eat after a long bike ride without compression, I did pay for it. My leg would swell and become uncomfortable. But again, I would be able to take corrective action and bring things back down to “my normal”.



Vicki Ferg works as a public servant in health care management and has been living with primary lymphedema for the past seven years. She also serves as a member of the Canadian Armed Forces Reserves and deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan for six months in 2009.

On 30 July 2017, in Whistler, British Columbia, at 44 years of age, I became an Ironman. It was 7 am when I got into the cool water of Alta Lake with just under 2000 other athletes, and I swam 3.8 kms. I was terrified until about 400m into the swim; terrified of the water, with all the other swimmers around me, terrified of the distance I was trying to accomplish and terrified of how my body would react. By the time I came out of the water, one hour and twenty minutes later, I was grinning, because I just knew I was doing this and I was living my life.

After my swim, I ditched my wetsuit, adjusted my kit, applied loads of sunscreen, grabbed my helmet and ran off to find my bike. I enjoyed the stunning views that the Whistler bike course provides, and just let myself love riding my bike on the car-free road, in the company of some pretty amazing athletes.

Seven and a half hours later, I was getting a little over the high of being on my bike. I couldn't quite get over the fact that I would now have to run a marathon. I was nervous again, but I knew the hard parts were over.

I saw my family cheering me on. I couldn't believe that I could run (OK, I wasn't going very fast but my legs were moving). I had taken enough fuel in during my bike ride that I was still able to move forward, and I was going to be able to finish.



Even the finish line at an Ironman is amazing. As each person crosses the finish, he or she is called out by name, and the announcer yells, "YOU ARE AN IRONMAN!" I had considered how emotional I might be, but I just grinned. Fourteen hours and forty-four

minutes after I got into the water, at 9:44pm, I was an IRONMAN.

So, how was my leg? That night when I lay in bed my whole body ached. Yet, my lymph leg was no worse than the rest of my body. The next day, I was fine. I moved slowly and deliberately, but I felt very little pain and there was virtually no additional edema in my leg.

Two months afterward, I wasn't working out. I wasn't running, I was barely getting on my bike, and only swimming occasionally. I was just tired of it all. My lymph leg began to feel congested, and I was getting edema around my ankle, which had never happened before.

These days, I'm getting myself back on track and making sure I do some activity at least six days a week. And you know what? After exercise my leg feels less congested, and almost instantly, the edema can be somewhat controlled. I know that I don't have to do twenty hours of training a week to maintain control of my edema. My Ironman training has taught me that I just need to do something active for thirty minutes to an hour at least six days a week and I'll feel great, I'll be living my life! 

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