

Erica Sweeny on the truth behind the fad that is lymphatic drainage massage

On A Roll

By sweeping your fingers along your cheeks and jawline and then down your neck, you can remove excess fluid from your face. Many social media influencers claim this technique, known as lymphatic drainage massage, offers health benefits for your skin, making it tighter and brighter and reducing puffiness. But does it?

The gentle, rhythmic movements of lymphatic drainage massage help disperse a clear fluid, called lymph, that circulates through the body's lymphatic system and can pool in your facial tissues, causing swelling.

Lymph can build up for several reasons, including sleeping poorly, eating salty foods, drinking alcohol, being dehydrated or sleeping on your back, said Dr Arpana A. Shah, a dermatologist at Med-Star Health in St Mary's County, Maryland, US.

"All these little things can give you a more bloated appearance," she said.

Lymphatic fluid usually drains naturally throughout the day. But gentle massage can sometimes speed up this dispersion, and it is often recommended to treat lymphedema — chronic swelling that most commonly occurs in the arms and legs.

Though there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of facial lymphatic drainage massage, Dr Shah said it can promote relaxation and increase blood flow to the skin, which may offer some marginal decrease in the puffiness of the face or other aesthetic benefits.

The lymphatic system, Dr Shah said, is "like the housekeeper of our body". This network of organs, tissues and vessels moves excess lymph from your tissues to the bloodstream, helping the body maintain its fluid balance. It also transports fluid through the lymph nodes, where immune cells destroy harmful substances like bacteria and viruses.

Several factors can disrupt the lymphatic system and cause fluid to accumulate in your face or elsewhere in the body, including surgery, lymphedema, a high-salt diet or being overweight or too sedentary, said Dr Roy Kim, a plastic surgeon in San Francisco in the US. He said he often recommends lymphatic drainage massage after some cosmetic surgeries, because it has been shown to improve



GLOW UP: The use of stone rollers is rooted in ancient Chinese beauty rituals and is known to boost circulation. Rose quartz is preferred for calming irritated or sensitive skin. The New York Times/ Javier Jaen

pain and swelling during recovery.

Gravity and movement will eventually drain the fluid, he said. But you can speed this along through gentle stroking to move excess fluid from your tissues, coaxing it toward the lymph nodes.

This can be done by a massage therapist or, Dr Kim said, you can massage yourself, using fingertips, a facial roller or *gua sha*, in which you gently scrape a stone along the contours of your face.

Some TikTok creators claim that performing lymphatic drainage massage on your face or neck can minimise puffiness, address conditions like acne, improve circulation, promote relaxation and remove toxins from the skin. But there is little research to back up the idea that it can improve the health or appearance of your skin.

A 2025 study of 34 women who used facial rollers or *gua sha* for eight weeks

found that they experienced some limited improvements in aspects of facial contour, including skin elasticity and muscle tone. Another study, published in 2018, included 19 men and seven women. It found that using a facial massage roller on one cheek for five weeks increased blood flow to that cheek, but the results lasted for just 10 minutes after each massage.

These studies included a small number of subjects and lasted only a few weeks — not long enough to assess facial lymphatic drainage massage's long-term effects, Dr Shah said. She added that larger, longer-term studies were needed to prove the benefit.

In general, doctors say, lymphatic drainage massage may improve your skin in a few ways.

Because it moves lymphatic fluid around, it can make skin appear less puffy, Dr Shah said.

Although lymphatic drainage massage may not provide striking results or any lasting improvements, "there's not really any downside", Dr Kim said. The massage method is safe and relaxing for most people, and facial rollers and *gua sha* tools are not very expensive, costing about \$10 to \$20 (£900 to £1,900).

If you're curious to try it, he said, wash your face to start and make sure your hands or massage tools are clean. Some people apply moisturisers, serums or other skin care products with facial rollers or *gua sha* tools.

Use "light pressure", said Lilli Benck, medical director of massage therapy at University Hospitals in Cleveland, US. Massage in one direction at a time (not back and forth), "up away from the centre of the face toward the neck", hairline or ears, she said. Then, massage the neck and around the clavicle. Repeat these movements for about five minutes.

Applying too much pressure or massaging too aggressively could cause bruising, irritation or swelling, or you could break blood vessels, which isn't harmful but may look unsightly, the experts said.

If you're unsure about the proper technique, Benck recommended seeing a massage therapist for guidance. And if your face is chronically puffy no matter what you do, Dr Shah suggested seeing a doctor to rule out a medical condition, such as an allergy, lymphedema or hormonal changes.

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