

# Lymphoedema in the Lower Limbs

**Patient Information**

## **Introduction**

This leaflet tells you about the condition known as lymphoedema. We hope it will answer some of the questions that you, or those who care for you, may have at this time. It is not meant to replace the discussion between you and your surgeon but helps you to understand more about what is discussed.

## **What is lymphoedema?**

Lymphoedema is a swelling in the tissues underneath the skin. It is most commonly seen in the legs and arms and sometimes also in areas next to the affected limb. In the case of lower limb lymphoedema it could be that the vulva, pelvis or abdominal region is affected.

## **What is the lymphatic system?**

As well as the circulatory system transporting blood around the body we also have a lymphatic system. This system is made up of a network of very small vessels or channels just under the skin, draining into larger vessels deep within the body. At various intervals along the system are lymph glands or nodes. The lymphatic system carries a colourless fluid called lymph, this helps to fight infections, carries nourishment to the cells and takes waste away.

The lymph fluid normally drains back via the lymphatic channels and returns to the blood circulatory system. If something prevents this drainage system from working then swelling of the tissues results. This is called lymphoedema.

## **Why does lymphoedema occur?**

Lymphoedema occurs when the lymphatic system does not function properly. For some people, it may be that there are simply not enough lymphatic vessels in the body or that these vessels do not work properly. This is known as primary lymphoedema. Other people develop secondary lymphoedema, which is caused by trauma to the lymphatic vessels and nodes. This is usually as a result of infections, surgery or radiotherapy treatments.

## **Why am I at risk of developing lymphoedema?**

You are at risk of developing lymphoedema because you have had surgical removal of some of your lymph nodes and/or radiotherapy as

part of your cancer treatment.

These treatments can interrupt the drainage of lymph fluid and cause scarring to your lymphatic vessels leaving you at risk of developing lymphoedema.

It is important to remember that not everyone at risk will develop lymphoedema. Some people will have a very efficient lymph drainage system and will never develop the condition following their cancer treatment. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing who will develop lymphoedema and who will not. Lymphoedema can develop as a result of a trauma, injury or infection months or even years following cancer treatments. This is why we encourage you to follow some simple guidelines related to skin care, diet and exercise in order to help prevent lymphoedema occurring.

### **How should I care for my skin?**

The aim of a daily skin care regime is to reduce the risk of you developing a skin infection or cellulitis. If you already have lymphoedema it can cause the condition to worsen. If you are at risk of developing lymphoedema, an episode of cellulitis may be the trigger for lymphoedema to develop.

Good skin care involves washing your legs and feet daily, paying particular attention to toes. You should dry your skin thoroughly using a clean soft towel and inspect the skin for signs of injury or infection. Treat any breaks in the skin with an anti-septic cream. Treat any fungal infection with an anti-fungal cream. At night apply a non-perfumed moisturising cream to the skin. Apply the cream using upward strokes working your way up from your feet.

This regime will help to maintain skin hydration and suppleness preventing small breaks or cracks from developing on the skin. Any break or injury to the skin acts as an entry point for bacteria which can result in you developing cellulitis.

### **Helpful hints for managing your lymphoedema:**

- Always protect your skin from the sun by using sun cream of factor 15 or above.

- If you are somewhere where you could be at risk of insect bites use an insect repellent to avoid being bitten.
- Protect your feet from injury by not going bare foot.
- Take care when cutting your toe nails and avoid damage to your cuticles.
- Visit a podiatrist if you develop problems with your feet.
- Only use an electric razor if removing unwanted leg hair. Razor blades, leg wax, creams and any other methods of removing hair should all be avoided.
- Always treat cuts and grazes promptly with an anti-septic cream.
- Always treat fungal infections promptly with an anti-fungal cream.
- Avoid tight fitting clothing as these may restrict the flow of lymph.
- Avoid wearing shoes that do not fit properly.
- Avoid having injections in your 'at risk' limbs if at all possible, always discuss using an alternative site with your nurse or doctor.
- Avoid compression stockings which are too tight, inappropriate use of compression hosiery can cause trauma to the skin.

**You should look out for signs of infection and if an injury becomes red, hot, swollen or painful, seek advice from your GP immediately. Infections must be treated promptly and may require a course of antibiotics.**

### **What exercise should I do?**

If you do not already exercise then you should introduce gentle exercise into your daily routine. Low impact exercises such as walking, swimming and yoga are good. Movement of your leg muscles will encourage lymph flow and reduce the risk of lymphoedema developing.

Points to remember about exercise:

- Do gentle exercises every day rather than occasional bursts.
- Keep moving your ankles and toes when sitting or standing for long periods of time.
- Exercises which include deep breathing techniques help stimulate the deep lymphatic system. You could join a relaxation class such as yoga.

**Seek advice if you are unsure about the right exercises for you.**

### **Why is diet important?**

It is important to eat a sensible and healthy diet as excess weight will put added strain on your lymphatic system. Maintaining your weight within a normal range for your height and age can assist lymph drainage, reducing your risk of developing the condition.

### **How will I know if I have lymphoedema?**

You may have developed lymphoedema if any of the following occur:

- A gradual swelling of one or both of your legs.
- Aching, stiffness, heaviness and tightness in your legs or upper thighs.
- Shoes and clothing which normally fit, becoming tight.

These symptoms may get worse as time passes.

### **What treatment might I need?**

Treatment for lymphoedema usually involves the following:

- Compression garments.
- Skin care.
- Exercise.
- Simple lymphatic drainage – a massage technique which stimulates the flow of lymph fluid by the working lymphatics, this in turn encourages the flow of fluid from the swollen limb. Your clinical nurse specialist will refer you to the lymphoedema service if this is needed.

### **What are the benefits of treatment?**

Early treatment can:

- Prevent the condition progressing.
- Reduce the risk of episodes of cellulitis occurring.
- Reduce the risk of mobility problems associated with a swollen limb.

### **Can lymphoedema be cured?**

Once the condition has developed lymphoedema cannot be cured. However, it can usually be controlled through treatment and causes little disruption to your normal life style.

### **If I think I may have lymphoedema what should I do?**

It is important that you contact your GP, hospital consultant or specialist nurse who can then make a referral for you to see a lymphoedema specialist. The lymphoedema specialist will advise, treat and help you control your condition.

**It is important that you make a list of all medicines you are taking and bring it with you to all your follow-up clinic appointments. If you have any questions at all, please ask your surgeon, oncologist or nurse. It may help to write down questions as you think of them so that you have them ready. It may also help to bring someone with you when you attend your outpatients appointments.**

For details of local cancer support groups and organisations, please ask your specialist nurse.

### **Glossary of medical terms used in this information:**

**Cellulitis:** an inflammation of body tissue (especially that below the skin), sometimes with fever, swelling, redness and pain.

**Cuticle:** the strip of hardened skin at the base and sides of a fingernail or toenail.

**Lymph:** an almost clear fluid which bathes body tissues and is found in lymphatic vessels and nodes.

**Lymph nodes:** hundreds of small oval bodies that contain lymph. These act as a first line of defence against infections.

**Podiatrist:** a doctor who diagnoses and treats disorders of the foot.

**Radiotherapy:** X-ray treatment that uses high energy rays to damage or kill cancer cells.

For more information on lymphoedema, visit:  
<http://www.lymphedemapeople.com>

**Local sources of further information**

You can visit any of the health/cancer information centres listed below:

**Birmingham Women's NHS Foundation Trust**

Health Information Centre  
Birmingham Women's Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust  
Metchley Park Road  
Edgbaston  
Birmingham B15 2TG  
Telephone: 0121 627 2608

**Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust**

Health Information Centre  
Birmingham Heartlands Hospital  
Bordesley Green  
Birmingham B9 5SS  
Telephone: 0121 424 2280

Cancer Information and Support Centre  
Good Hope Hospital  
Rectory Road  
Sutton Coldfield B75 7RR  
Telephone: 0121 424 9486

**Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust**

The Courtyard Centre  
Sandwell General Hospital (Main Reception)  
Lyndon  
West Bromwich B71 4HJ  
Telephone: 0121 507 3792  
Fax: 0121 507 3816

**University Hospital Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust**

The Patrick Room  
Cancer Centre  
Queen Elizabeth Hospital

Edgbaston  
Birmingham B15 2TH  
Telephone: 0121 697 8417

**Walsall Primary Care Trust**

Cancer Information & Support Services  
Challenge Building  
Hatherton Street  
Walsall WS1 1YB  
Freephone: 0800 783 9050

**About this information**

This guide is provided for general information only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Every effort is taken to ensure that this information is accurate and consistent with current knowledge and practice at the time of publication.

We are constantly striving to improve the quality of our information. If you have a suggestion about how this information can be improved, please contact us via our website:  
<http://www.birminghamcancer.nhs.uk>.

This information was produced by Pan Birmingham Cancer Network and was written by Consultant Surgeons, Clinical Nurse Specialists, Allied Health Professionals, Patients and Carers from the following Trusts:

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