

Reducing the risk of lymphoedema to your arm

Lymph is a colourless fluid that forms in the tissues of the body. It carries waste products and potentially harmful bacteria and toxins back into the bloodstream through a network of vessels and nodes called the lymphatic system.

The **lymphatic system** helps protect us from infection and disease. It is a crucial part of the body's immune system.

Lymph nodes filter the lymph (removing dead or abnormal cells, including cancer cells and bacteria) and the waste moves on through the body where it is passed in urine. There are hundreds of lymph nodes in clusters around the body, including underarms (axillae).

Lymphoedema is long-term swelling in the tissues below the skin which occurs when lymph cannot drain away and builds up.

Lymphoedema may occur:

- When lymph nodes are removed through surgery or following a sampling of the lymph nodes (sentinel lymph node biopsy)
- When lymph vessels are scarred or damaged because of the effects of treatment or disease
- When drainage routes are reduced if scar tissue forms following surgery and/or radiotherapy.

Not everyone develops lymphoedema, but you are more at risk of developing it in the hand and arm on the same side that you had treatment. It could also develop in the breast and the front and back of the chest wall on the same side.

It is usual for swelling to occur immediately following surgery and/or radiotherapy as part of the healing process. If the swelling does not reduce after six to eight weeks, please contact your hospital doctor for a referral or the Lymphoedema Service for further advice.

To avoid overloading your lymphatic system, which could trigger swelling, it is important to try to:

- Look after your skin; this can reduce the risk of infection and inflammation
- Avoid injury to the area at risk.



Helping to reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema

Skin care

Regularly using an unperfumed moisturiser (for example, E45) will help prevent your skin from becoming dry. Dry skin can lead to the skin developing cracks and therefore increase the risk of infection.

If you notice any signs of infection (for example, the area at risk becomes sore or red and this is combined with a high temperature, shivering or flu like symptoms) contact your GP who may prescribe a course of antibiotics. You will need to take a 14 day course of a broad spectrum antibiotic to ensure that the infection is fully treated.

Do:

- Keep skin clean and well moisturised
- Wear appropriate protective clothing, for example, gardening/oven gloves
- Use a minimum 40 SPF or above sun protection cream and take care not to burn as this could cause inflammation
- Take care not to damage skin when removing body hair; try using an electric shaver
- Promptly treat any skin breakages (cut and scratches) with an antiseptic cream eg. Savlon
- Ensure the antiseptic cream has not expired.

On areas at risk of lymphoedema, be careful with:

- Blood pressure readings
- Tattoos, injections, blood tests and acupuncture
- Tight fitting jewellery (including watches) as this could restrict lymph drainage from your hand
- Extremes of temperature should be monitored as this could overload your lymphatic system triggering swelling
- If you have a massage, let the therapist know you are at risk of lymphoedema. It is recommended only light massage, and not deep tissue massage, is carried out in the area you are at risk of developing lymphoedema.

Exercise

Do:

- Return to your usual activities gradually after your treatment and normal use of your limb
- Movement, activity, stretching and deep breathing. These will activate your muscles, and muscles pump lymph fluid through your body helping to reduce swelling.



However, be careful with:

- Long periods of a very strenuous or repetitive activity, which could lead to inflammation and overload your lymphatic system.

If you have any concerns about resuming a particular activity, or taking up a new sport, you can discuss it with your hospital doctor, physiotherapist or lymphoedema therapist.

Weight management

Being overweight puts an extra burden on the lymphatic system. It also makes it harder to be active and reduces the positive impact of movement on the lymphatic vessels.

Contact details

If you have any questions regarding lymphoedema or if you develop swelling in your arm(s), however mild it is, please contact the lymphoedema service, as it is easier to treat in the early stages.

Chelsea: 0207 808 2981

Sutton: 0208 661 3504

Alternatively, please call:

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899

(Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

