

Reducing the risk of lymphoedema after groin or pelvic lymph node treatment

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is long-term swelling under the skin that happens when lymph fluid cannot drain properly.

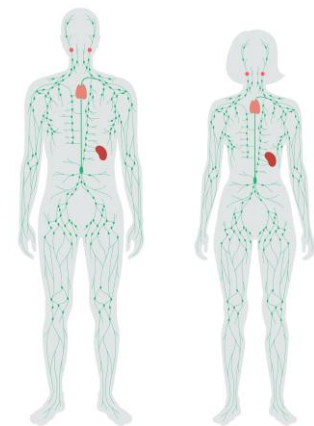
Lymph is a colourless fluid that forms in the tissues of the body. It normally drains back into the blood circulation through a network of vessels and nodes called the lymphatic system.

What do lymph nodes do?

Lymph nodes are small glands that act like filters. They help remove waste, germs, and abnormal cells, including cancer cells. This helps protect the body from infection. There are hundreds of lymph nodes in the body. They are found in groups in places such as:

- head and neck
- armpits
- groins
- pelvis
- Abdomen

As lymph fluid travels through the body, it passes through these lymph nodes. The fluid then drains into larger lymph vessels and finally returns to the bloodstream.



When can lymphoedema occur?

- Lymph nodes containing cancer cells are removed or damaged during surgery.
- Lymph vessels are scarred or damaged due to the effects of treatment or disease.
- Lymph drainage routes are reduced due to scar tissue from surgery and/or radiotherapy.

Not everyone develops lymphoedema following the removal of lymph nodes from the groin, pelvic or abdominal region, although there is a risk. The risk will depend on which lymph nodes have been removed. If you are unsure, please ask your oncology, surgical or lymphoedema team. Most commonly, swelling will develop on the same side that you had surgery and/or radiotherapy, below the waist and into the leg(s). It may also develop in the abdominal or genital area.

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



To help your lymphatic system work well and lower the risk of lymphoedema, there are some simple steps you can take:

- **Skin Care**

	What you can do	Why	How and when
Preventing Infections	Keep your skin clean and moisturised with a fragrance-free moisturiser.	Maintains good skin health and prevents cracks that can allow bacteria in.	Daily. Reapply after sweating or outdoor activities.
	Be aware of any cuts, rashes, or fungal infections (athlete's foot) and treat them quickly.	Spotting problems early helps prevent infections like cellulitis (skin infection*).	If you notice a cut or nick, clean it and apply antiseptic. Keep the space between your toes clean and dry.
Reducing Inflammation	Use fragrance-free moisturiser.	Supports skin barrier and reduces irritation	Twice daily
	Protect skin from heat, friction, and sun	Heat and irritation can cause inflammation	Daily. Use shade, SPF, and avoid exposure to sudden changes to temperature.

* If you notice signs of infection such redness in the area at risk, soreness, fever, or flu-like symptoms, contact your GP. They may prescribe a course of antibiotics to fully treat the infection.

- **Exercise**

What you can do	Why	How and when
Gradually return to exercises you enjoy after clearance from your medical/surgical team.	When you move your muscles, they gently squeeze the lymph vessels, helping the fluid flow through your body better.	Start and progress slowly, take regular breaks. Aim for healthy exercise goals without overloading your body.
Maintain a healthy body weight	Higher BMI has been associated to a higher risk of lymphoedema.	Stay active. Work towards the recommended exercise goals for general health: 150 minutes of aerobic activity each week and strength training twice a week.
Avoid long periods of repetitive activity.	This could lead to inflammation in your tissues and can overload your lymphatic system.	Take short breaks every 1-2 hours to stretch and change position during the day.

* If you have concerns about resuming exercise or starting a new activity, speak with your doctor, physiotherapist, or a lymphoedema therapist.



- **Nutrition**

What you can do	Why	How and when
Balanced meals with lean protein, vegetables, whole grains	Higher BMI has been associated with a higher risk of lymphoedema and inflammation.	Every meal.
Stay well-hydrated	Hydration supports better circulation and lymphatic flow.	6–8 glasses/day; especially important on hot or active days

- **Scar Massage**

What you can do	Why	How and when
Gently massage your scar with light pressure with a simple unscented moisturiser once the wound is fully healed .	Helps prevent tissue adhesions and improve lymphatic flow, minimising the risk of fluid buildup.	Few times a day, 10 min per session. If you find touching your scar unpleasant, you can use tools such as a makeup sponge/ soft cloth to massage the area gently.

Contact details

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

Chelsea: 020 7808 2981

Sutton: 020 8661 3504

Alternatively, please call:

The Royal Marsden Hotline 020 8915 6899

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

