

Reducing the risk of lymphoedema after surgery and/or radiotherapy to remove lymph nodes from your groin and/or pelvic region

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.

Lymph nodes act as filters removing dead or abnormal cells, including cancer cells and bacteria, playing an important part in the body's defence against infection. There are hundreds of lymph nodes in the body. They are found in clusters in the head and neck region, underarms (axillae), groin, pelvis and abdomen. As lymph returns to the circulation, the lymph filters through these nodes draining into larger lymph vessels in the body, which then join the main circulation.

Lymphoedema is chronic swelling in the tissues below the skin which occurs when lymph cannot drain away.

Lymphoedema may occur when:

- Lymph nodes are removed through surgery or damaged as they contain cancer cells
- Lymph vessels are scarred or damaged due to the effects of treatment or disease
- Lymph drainage routes are reduced when scar tissue forms following 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 area where you are at 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 avoid overloading your lymphatic system, which could trigger swelling; it is important to try to:

- Look after your skin to try and reduce the risk of infection and/or inflammation
- Avoid injury to the area at risk.

Helping to reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema



Skin care

Regularly using an un-perfumed moisturiser 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, such as the area at risk becoming sore or red and this is combined with a high temperature, shivering or flu like symptoms, contact your family doctor (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
- Wash and dry between your toes thoroughly when showering to reduce your risk of fungal infections, such as athlete's foot; if a fungal infection develops, treat it promptly
- Wear appropriate protective clothing such as long trousers when gardening
- Avoid going barefoot when outdoors or in communal areas, such as swimming pools, to avoid trauma to the feet and reduce the risk of infection
- Use sun protection cream with a minimum of 40 SPF and take care not to burn as this could cause inflammation
- Take care not to damage your skin when removing body hair
- Take care when cutting toenails; use nail clippers and do not cut your cuticles. If in doubt, see a podiatrist.
- Use an insect repellent when necessary to avoid insect bites. If you are bitten, monitor for signs of infection.

On the areas at risk of lymphoedema, try to **avoid**:

- Cuts, scratches, insect bites
- Blood pressure readings
- Injections, blood tests and acupuncture
- Extremes of temperature, such as ice packs, saunas or steam rooms. In particular, the sudden movement from one extreme temperature to another, such as hot to cold, as this can overload your lymphatic system and trigger swelling
- Wearing tight fitting clothes
- If you have a massage, let the therapist know you are at risk of lymphoedema. It is recommended only light massage, not deep tissue massage, is carried out in the area where you are at risk of developing lymphoedema, due to inflammation that deep massage can cause.



Exercise

Do:

- Return to your usual activities gradually after your treatment
- Use your limb as normal; exercise is good for your lymphatic system as muscle activity helps lymph drainage.

However, try to **avoid**:

- Sudden strenuous movements or activities
- Standing for long periods
- Long periods of 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 this with your hospital doctor, physiotherapist or lymphoedema therapist.

Compression garments

If you have had lymph nodes removed from your groin, your lymphoedema therapist **may** advise that you wear a compression garment.

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 Macmillan Hotline 020 8915 6899

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

