

Infection and lymphoedema

A bacterial infection of the skin, also known as cellulitis, results in an acute spreading inflammation of the skin and surrounding tissues. This can be a problem for people with lymphoedema. It may begin with general symptoms, such as a high temperature, shivering, vomiting or flu-like symptoms. Rashes, redness, discomfort or an increase in the size of the swollen area may occur but may not be obvious immediately. You may not notice any cut, scratch or other means of entry for infection.

Early treatment of infection in someone with lymphoedema is important for three reasons:

1. The infection can make you very unwell for a week or more and you may even need to come into hospital
2. The swollen area may increase in size - this could make your lymphoedema more difficult to treat
3. The texture (feel) of your skin could change in the long term.

Treatment of infection

- Flucloxacillin 500mg 6 hourly for 2 weeks or
- Amoxicillin 500mg 8 hourly for 2 weeks.

or if you are allergic to penicillin

- Clarithromycin 500mg 12 hourly or
- Erythromycin 500mg 6 hourly.

During an acute infection, it is important to rest and elevate the affected area/limb. Avoid wearing your compression garments until the acute symptoms have begun to settle and the affected area is comfortable enough to tolerate them. Your compression garment may need to be reviewed as the area may be more swollen.

You should seek further medical attention from your GP or out of hours service if your symptoms are not improving after 48 hours or if your symptoms are getting worse.

Treatment of repeated infections

If you suffer two or three infections in one year, you may be offered long term antibiotics to reduce the risk of repeated infections. These are likely to be:

- Penicillin V 500mg daily

or if you are allergic to penicillin



- Clarithromycin 250mg daily.

These are usually discontinued after one year, however they may be extended by your doctors if you have a further infection. Your hospital doctor or lymphoedema therapist may recommend that you always carry antibiotics. You can then take them by mouth at the first sign of infection. If antibiotics have been prescribed for you, always make sure you have enough supplies, especially if you are away from home and particularly if travelling abroad.

How can I help to reduce the risk of this type of infection?

Keep your skin healthy and well moisturised. Try to avoid things which could lead to infection, such as:

- Injections into the swollen arm
- Having blood taken from a swollen limb (or giving blood if you are a donor)
- Cuts and grazes
- Insect bites or stings
- Scratches or bites from pets
- Non-essential operations on the swollen area
- Acupuncture.

If you suffer an injury to the swollen area, treat it promptly. Wash the area with warm, soapy water and apply an antiseptic cream, and watch for any signs of local infection developing, such as redness, extra swelling and/or pain.

If you have athlete's foot or another skin condition such as eczema which affects the swollen area, this must be treated straight away. Ask your doctor or lymphoedema therapist for advice.

Further information

Lymphoedema Support Network

Website: www.lymphoedema.org

Tel: 020 7351 4480

Contact details

If you have any concerns or queries, please contact your lymphoedema therapist:

Sutton 020 8661 3504

Chelsea 020 7808 2981

Alternatively, please call:

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899
(available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

