

Exercise for lymphoedema

Exercise is an important part of lymphoedema treatment and management. This information sheet provides general advice on exercise for patients who have limb and/or truncal swelling.

The benefits of exercise include:

- Helping to maintain the range of movement in a limb and keeping your joints mobile
- Helping to drain lymph from the swollen area, as your muscles work like a pump when exercised
- Helping to maintain a healthy weight - being overweight can contribute to both lymphoedema and the incidence of cellulitis
- General wellbeing and cardiovascular fitness.

Many people are afraid to use their swollen limb because they are worried that this will make their swelling worse. In fact, exercise encourages lymph drainage. If you avoid using a limb and limit your mobility, it can result in stiffness and an increase in swelling. Exercise can take many forms, such as walking, going swimming or doing housework.

Always remember:

- Exercise should be started gently and progressed gradually to avoid any strain
- If your swollen limb feels tired, aches or is uncomfortable, ease off or stop
- Include a warmup and cool down in your exercise programme to help the lymphatic system clear the excess fluid
- Include adequate rest periods in between exercise sessions - indications that you have over exercised do not always develop immediately after exercise
- Exercise should be matched to your existing fitness level, ability and skill, especially if you are taking up an activity that you have not done for some time - we all have different levels of fitness and ability to exercise so find the right level of activity for you
- Compression garments (or bandages) should be worn during exercise – garments provide a surface for the muscles to work against, increasing the muscle pumping effect
- If you experience any pain in your limb whilst exercising, you should stop and speak to a health professional for advice.

Warm up and cool down before and after each exercise session

It is recommended that a warmup and cool down should also include carrying out stretches.

Stretches can help to maintain joint range and, as a result, the normal use of your limb. They should be performed slowly and gently to avoid muscle strain and the risk of triggering inflammation.



Deep breathing exercises

These can be incorporated into an exercise programme. Deep breathing decreases the pressure within the chest and is thought to encourage the pumping action of the deeper lymphatics.

Strengthening exercises

Strengthening exercises are generally performed against some form of resistance which may include free weights, elastic bands or exercise equipment. When starting or returning to any form of weight training or resistance exercise, it is important that this is done slowly so that any effects can be monitored. Carrying out more strenuous exercise should be gradual. It is safer to limit exercise to low repetitions and light resistance initially and to progress gradually. Only increase the number of repetitions or resistance used when you can easily work at the previous level.

Current research recommends that providing this advice is followed, resistance exercises have not been found to worsen lymphoedema. The increase in muscle strength may improve the effectiveness of the muscular pump which helps drain lymph. In addition, strengthening muscles in your swollen limb may reduce the likelihood of injury and risk of sprain.

Aerobic exercise

Aerobic exercise can include a variety of activities such as walking, cycling and swimming. These forms of exercise stimulate the muscle pump in the swollen limb, as well as encourage deep abdominal breathing with the increased exertion. As with other forms of exercise, increase your level of fitness gradually. Aerobic exercise will also assist with weight control.

Swimming

The water assists in supporting the weight of heavy limbs which may make moving them easier, placing less stress through joints. You do not need to wear your compression garments as the water provides resistance for the muscles to work against and can also be used to progress exercises. Even if you cannot swim, you can still benefit from doing exercises in the water.

Please note: you should not swim if you have any cuts or open wounds due to the risk of infection.

Returning to a specific sport or activity

It will take time to rebuild strength, flexibility and endurance in the muscle groups most used in each sport or activity. If you have any questions relating to specific sports, please contact your lymphoedema therapist or physiotherapist for more advice.

If you have any pre-existing medical conditions, please check with your GP before returning to a previous activity or starting a new exercise programme.

Contact details

If you have any further questions, please contact the Lymphoedema Service:

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