

8. Feeling Swollen - Lymphoedema

Lymphoedema is the swelling of an arm, leg or other part of the body because of an abnormal collection of a fluid called lymph in the body tissues. When a lymph vessel or node becomes blocked or if it has been removed by surgery, the lymph fluid is unable to pass along it. Because the excess tissue fluid cannot drain away normally, it builds up and causes swelling. This not only changes people's physical appearance, but can also cause pain and long-term disability. Certain treatments for cancer such as radiotherapy can cause lymphoedema by causing a build-up of scar tissue within the lymph nodes. Lymphoedema can cause other effects such as a feeling of fullness or heaviness; tightness and stretching of the skin; swelling; reduced movement of the joints; thickening and dryness of the skin and/or discomfort/pain. Those who have lymphoedema usually have mild symptoms but in severe cases the skin may become broken and the colourless lymph fluid can leak out onto the surface. Hormonal changes from therapy can cause swelling or puffiness in the face, hands, feet, or abdomen.

How can I manage feeling swollen?

Avoiding infection

- Any break in the skin, however small, can make you more likely to get an infection. Trying to avoid infection or inflammation of the affected area is important.
- Wear gloves for washing up and other household tasks to avoid cuts.
- Wear gloves and long sleeves if you are gardening or handling animals to avoid scratches.
- Use insect repellent to prevent insect bites. If you are stung on, or near, the affected area, get medical advice.
- Use a thimble when sewing. To avoid cuts, use an electric razor when shaving hair from the swollen area.
- Cut your nails with nail clippers and use hand cream regularly.
- Never push back or cut your cuticles.
- Treat even small grazes and cuts straight away.

Exercise

Exercise can help, but care should be taken not to over-exercise the affected area, as that might increase the risk of lymphoedema developing. You are advised to use your arm or leg as normal and you should be able to continue with any sports or activities that you enjoyed doing before. The most important factor is when you start a new activity/sport or re-start one that you used to do, start gradually and gradually get yourself up to the level you were before or where you want to be. Massage can sometimes be effective in reducing discomfort and to prevent a build-up of more fluid.

If you have arm swelling:

- When sitting down, rest your arm fully supported on a cushion placed on the arm of a chair.
- Try not to rest your arm above shoulder height - it may reduce blood flow to your arm and increase discomfort.
- You might find it helpful to raise your arm slightly on a pillow when you are lying down.
- Avoid carrying heavy shopping or other loads with your affected arm.

- Be careful when you use your affected arm for activities that involve a lot of repetition (e.g. ironing). Some people find that too much activity can make the swelling worse.
- Do not wear clothes or jewellery that are tight fitting.

If you have leg swelling:

- It is a good idea not to cross your legs when you are sitting.
- Don't sit with your legs down for long periods - either lie with your legs up on a sofa, or have them fully supported on a footstool.
- Try not to stand still for long periods of time. If you have to stand, do the following exercises to stimulate the pump action of your muscles:
- Raise yourself up on to your toes frequently to tense and relax your calf muscles.
- Shift your weight from one leg to the other and transfer your weight from heels to toes, as if walking on the spot.

Manual lymphatic drainage (MLD)

- Manual lymphatic drainage differs from ordinary massage - it is very gentle and aims to encourage movement of lymph away from swollen areas. MLD is particularly useful if there is swelling in the face, breast, abdomen, genitals or elsewhere on the trunk.
- As this is a specialised form of massage, it should be given only by a trained therapist.

Skin care

- Lymphoedema can make the skin become dry and itchy and it may crack. Good moisturising can help to prevent this.

Compression

- Compression sleeves can be used for swollen arms and compression stockings for swollen legs. The garments work by compressing the swollen tissues and stopping fluid from building up.

Diet

- Avoidance of foods containing high amounts of salt is recommended and medicine, such as a diuretic, can be prescribed to help the body rid of any excess fluids.

Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
Lymphoedema Service This is a nurse led service providing individualised care and encouraging self-management through specialised treatment and education with the aim to allow the individual to lead as independent a life as possible.	Located at St Lukes' Turnchapel site and requires a referral from a consultant, GP or CNS.
Mustard Tree Cancer Support & Triangle Drop In Centres Ask questions, share concerns, offers a range of services including benefits advice. Support, advice and information for cancer patients and their carers	Mustard Tree, Derriford Hospital: Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm 01752 430060/01752 431468 Kingsbridge: Tuesdays 10am to 4pm 01548 852349 Liskeard: Thursdays 10am to 4pm 01579 373500 Tavistock: Fridays 10am to 4pm 01822 615935
Other Resources	Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse or District Nurse.

National Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
Lymphoedema Support Network	www.lymphoedema.org/lisn/index.html
Breast Cancer Care	https://www.breastcancercare.org.uk/breast-cancer-information/impact-breast-cancer/diet-breast-cancer
Macmillan Cancer Support Provide comprehensive advice and information on all aspects of cancer.	www.macmillan.org.uk 0808 808 0000 (Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm)

Further Information:

Macmillan Cancer Support booklets: – available free from the Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre
Understanding lymphoedema