

Lymphoedema Advice Booklet - Leg

What is Lymphoedema?

Water and protein (lymph) is constantly being leaked into the tissues by tiny vessels (lymphatics) which join up with larger lymphatics to form a drainage system.

If the lymphatics are not working properly, then there is a build up of lymph in the tissues and this causes the limb to be swollen (lymphoedema). This swelling may be soft or hard depending on how long it has been present. It may also feel heavy, making normal use of the limb difficult and sometimes painful.

Who is at risk?

Anyone who has had pelvic surgery with or without radiotherapy to this area is at risk of lymphoedema. It can occur within a few months, a couple of years, or 20 years or more after cancer therapy. With proper education and care, lymphoedema can be kept well under control.

Treating Lymphoedema

Although lymphoedema cannot be totally cured it can be controlled by following a treatment programme. This aims to reduce pain and restore limb function and size. This should be under the guidance of a specialist physiotherapist/nurse and your doctor.

Treatment

1. Skin Care

1. Aim to prevent any form of infection by using antiseptic and anti-fungal creams when necessary. Monitor any cut no matter how small, even a rag nail.
2. If you notice that your skin has become red, hot and tender contact your doctor immediately as the protein-rich swelling is a perfect breeding site for infections. If you wear a compression garment, remove this for the first few days, then select an older and more stretched garment for the next couple of days. When the infection has cleared, return to your original garment. This infection is often referred to as cellulitis
3. Dry the skin well, especially between the toes, to avoid fungal infections e.g. athletes foot. Any fungal infections should be treated.
4. Take care when cutting nails. Use clippers, emery board or attend a chiropodist
5. Don't walk around barefoot as you may injure your foot

6. Protect yourself against excessive heat which can increase swelling by avoiding hot baths/showers, saunas and extreme temperatures

7. Use creams or electric razors rather than dry razors

2. Hosiery, Compression Sleeves and Stockings Special compression garments are designed to prevent the build up of fluid. They also assist the muscles of your body to pump the existing fluid out of the limb by providing a firm surface for the muscles to work against.

All garments should be applied first thing in the morning and only taken off when going to bed. Ordinary household rubber gloves e.g. Marigold, are useful to apply and alter the fit of your garment.

The stocking should be eased onto the foot first as shown by your physiotherapist. Gradually work the stocking up over the knee to the thigh.

Talcum powder applied to the limbs will also aid easier application of the garments.

A garment must not have wrinkles, folds or tears in it, and should be replaced approximately every 6 months. Ideally each person will be given two garments. A garment should be washed daily according to manufacturers instructions.

The garment will require a period of adjustment on your behalf but do try to persevere. Discomfort in your limb can be eased by slow gentle exercise.

If you experience prolonged pain, tingling, discoloured toes or shortness of breath remove garment immediately and contact your physiotherapist who will reassess and supply you with new garments if necessary.

3. Exercises The muscle pumping effect gained by gentle exercise aids the removal of the lymph therefore:

- Always wear your garment when doing your exercises
- It is important for all exercises to be slow and rhythmical
- Begin and end exercises with 5 slow deep breaths keeping shoulders relaxed
- Rest for the count of 10 between each set of exercises

Examples of Exercise

When possible, do these exercises lying on your back:

1. - Tighten your buttocks, hold for 5 seconds, then relax
- Tighten thigh muscles, hold for 5 seconds, then relax
2. Bend and straighten your knees, one at a time
3. - Move your foot up and down at the ankle
Circle your foot to the left then the right

Your physiotherapist will progress your exercise programme as necessary.

4. Massage Your physiotherapist will instruct you in specific forms of lymph massage if necessary.

General Advice

1. Walk and exercise normally. Avoid standing still for long periods
2. When resting, have your legs fully supported so that your feet are level with your knees
3. Carry out the exercises you have been shown daily
4. Avoid tight clothing e.g. tight elastic on socks, tight belts or low fronted shoes for regular use
5. Long journeys in an aeroplane, car or train often cause an increase in swelling because you are sitting for a long time. Try to get an opportunity to move around every hour
6. Take precautions against being scratched or bitten by animals
7. If possible, never allow injections, blood taking or blood pressure cuffs on your swollen side
8. Use unscented oil or cream daily to moisturise your limb. Make sure it is completely absorbed before putting on your garment i.e. apply at night

When applying your moisturiser always use slow gentle upward strokes starting at the top of the leg and finishing at the foot.

The physiotherapist will demonstrate this simple moisturising massage to you