

## Lymphoedema Advice Booklet – Arm

### 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 satisfactory 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 breast and/or axillary surgery and often radiotherapy to these areas is at risk. Lymphoedema 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 straightforward 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. Take care when performing household tasks such as gardening, ironing and lifting food from an oven. Use protective gloves to prevent burns or cuts
4. Use suncream and insect repellent to guard against sunburn and bites
5. Protect yourself against excessive heat which can increase swelling by avoiding hot baths/showers, saunas and extreme temperatures

6. Use nail clippers or emery boards rather than scissors, and cream or electric razors rather than dry razors when working on your body
7. Take precautions against being scratched or bitten by animals
8. If possible, never allow injections, blood taking or blood pressure cuffs on your swollen side
9. Use unscented oil or cream daily to moisturise the entire limb. Make sure it is completely absorbed before putting on your garment i.e. apply at night.

Always apply your moisturising lotion with slow gentle upward strokes, starting at the shoulder and finishing at the hand.

The physiotherapist will demonstrate this simple moisturising massage to you

## **2. Compression Sleeves and Stockings**

Special compression garments are designed to prevent the build up of fluid and also to 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.

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 manufacturer 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 fingers or shortness of breath remove garment and contact your physiotherapist. Your physiotherapist should reassess and supply you with new garments as necessary.

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

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

- 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 Exercises**

1. Clasp both hands in front of you. Lift arms above head. Separate hands and bring arms down by your side
2. Slow 'boxing', 'rowing' or 'breast stroke' type movements
3. Slow bending/straightening of elbow
4. Slow bending/straightening of wrist
5. Make a fist, then straighten your fingers

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. Keep your arm moving and use it for light normal tasks
2. Carry out the exercises you have been shown
3. Do not carry heavy items with your affected arm
4. When sitting, rest the arm on cushions to elevate it (no higher than your shoulder)
5. Avoid tight clothing, especially tight bra straps and sleeve cuffs, or tight jewellery
6. Carry your handbag on the other shoulder