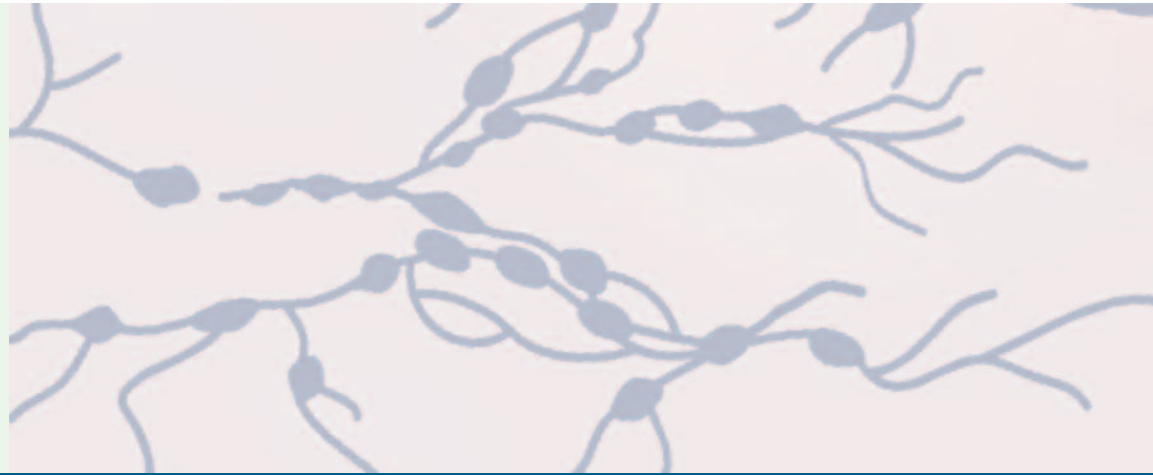
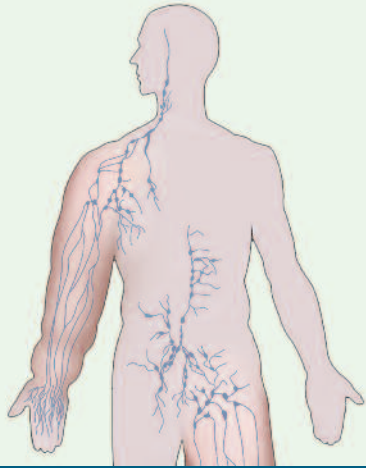




Belfast Health and
Social Care Trust



Advice for patients at risk of developing lymphoedema in the arm following cancer treatment



Have you had recent surgery or radiotherapy following a diagnosis of cancer?

If yes, this booklet contains important information as you may be at risk of developing lymphoedema. The following advice will help you:

- to understand the condition
- to reduce your risk of developing lymphoedema
- to recognise the early signs of lymphoedema.

Who is at risk?

You are at risk if you have had surgery or radiotherapy to your breast tissue and surrounding area including your armpit.



With proper education and care, the swelling can be reduced and lymphoedema can be kept well under control.

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a swelling which occurs as a result of an impaired lymphatic system. The lymphatic system works in harmony with the blood circulation system to transport the lymph and remove waste products.

If the system is disrupted, which can happen if lymph nodes are removed during surgery to treat cancer, then the lymph can build up to cause swelling.

Lymphoedema can occur within a few months, a couple of years, or 20 years or more after cancer therapy.

What are the signs/symptoms to look out for?

You may notice swelling in your arms, hand, fingers or breast which is similar to the photograph shown.

Your arm may feel heavy and you may experience difficulty in carrying out simple everyday tasks. The swelling may be less in the morning and increase as the day goes on. This swelling may be soft or hard depending on how long it has been present. It may also be in the armpit or under it. You may find it difficult to get clothes to fit.

What should you do to reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema cannot be totally cured but it can be controlled by following a straightforward treatment programme. This aims to restore limb size and function and decrease heaviness.

The following advice should be followed every day to reduce the risk of lymphoedema developing:

1. Skin care

Skin care is essential in the prevention and management of lymphoedema in order to maintain good skin quality and reduce the risk of infection. Part of the lymphatic system is a fine network of vessels running just below the skin. These vessels help to remove any extra fluid and waste substances from the body's tissues. It is therefore essential to look after the skin to prevent it becoming dry, cracked or broken. Damaged skin can lead to an infection called cellulitis which can increase the risk of developing lymphoedema.





a. Look after your skin:

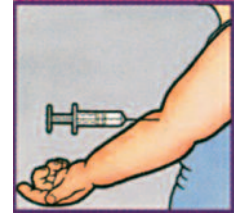
- Cleanse and moisturise your arms daily using unscented soap and cream using gentle upward strokes
- Protect yourself against excessive heat, which can increase swelling, by avoiding hot baths/showers, saunas and extreme temperatures
- Use nail clippers or emery boards rather than scissors
- Use electric razors instead of normal razors.

b. Aim to prevent infection:

- Try to avoid cuts, scratches, burns, insect bites and use antiseptic and antifungal creams when necessary. Monitor any cut no matter how small, even a rag nail
- Contact your doctor immediately if you notice that your skin has become red, hot and tender, as you may have an infection. This infection is often referred to as cellulitis and it is important to get this treated quickly with antibiotics.

c. *Avoid trauma to your arm where possible:*

- If possible, never allow injections, blood taking or blood pressure cuffs on the operated arm
- Avoid tight, restrictive clothing, e.g. tight bra straps, waistbands, watches etc.

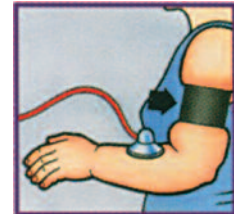


2 Complete the following exercises regularly:

Gentle rhythmic exercises will help to pump the muscles and remove the build up of lymph in the arm. For example, gentle repetitions of the following exercises:

- Slow 'boxing', 'rowing' or 'breast stroke' type movements
- Slow bending/straightening of elbow and wrist
- Make a fist and then straighten your fingers

Swimming, or any activity in water, is an excellent form of exercise for those at risk of lymphoedema in the arm.





3. Holidays and travel:

- Flying with long periods of inactivity can affect circulation and lymph movement; it may even trigger lymphoedema in people at risk of developing it
- Stretch and move around as much as possible when travelling
- There is no evidence to suggest that wearing a compression garment when flying reduces the risk of developing lymphoedema and an inappropriate garment may cause more problems
- Skincare is very important on holidays; avoid sunburn and insect bites
- Prevent dehydration by frequently drinking water.

4. Weight management:

Reduce or keep your weight within normal limits using a healthy eating plan and regular exercise as this will have positive benefits both for reducing the risk of lymphoedema, and for lymphoedema management. Excess weight can increase the strain on the lymphatic system.

4. General Recommendations:

- Try to use the at risk arm normally as using the muscles will help to improve lymphatic circulation
- Avoid over-exertion of the at risk arm e.g. lifting or carrying heavy objects.

What should you do if you notice swelling?

If you notice swelling anywhere on your arm, hand or breast area (even if it comes and goes) tell your GP or current health care provider and ask to be referred to a trained lymphoedema therapist.

Early treatment is always recommended when the swelling is soft and easily managed.





What treatment can I get if I begin to develop lymphoedema?

Your doctor will refer you to a trained lymphoedema specialist for assessment and treatment.

The therapist will suggest a number of treatment options which may include complex decongestive therapy (CDT). CDT consists of gentle massage (manual lymphatic drainage - MLD), multi-layer bandaging, skin care and exercises.

Lymphoedema is a long-term condition which means that you will need to learn new skills to help support the work of the therapist and, to learn what you can do to improve your own condition. The therapist will work with you to develop these skills.

The treatment aims to restore limb size and function and reduce swelling caused by the build up of lymph.

More information about lymphoedema can be found online: www.lnni.org

Useful contacts

Lymphoedema Network Northern Ireland (LNNI)

Tel: 028 9504 8545

Email: info@lnni.org

Web: www.lnni.org

Lymphoedema Support Northern Ireland (LSNI)

PO Box 851
BT9 6WY

Tel.: 028 9066 7570

Email: info@lymphoedemani.com

Web: www.lymphoedemani.com

The Lymphoedema Support Network (LSN)

St Luke's Crypt

Sydney Street

London

SW3 6NH

Tel.: 020 7351 0990

Email: adminlsn@lymphoedema.freeserve.co.uk

Web: www.lymphoedema.org/lsn

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