

Get moving with lymphoedema

Why is it important to keep active if you have lymphoedema or chronic oedema?

There is lots of evidence for the benefits of being as active as possible. It's good for the heart, lungs, mental wellbeing, helps with maintaining a healthy weight and reduces the risk of many chronic illnesses.

Keeping active also has specific benefits for the lymphatic system. Working muscles and deeper breathing caused by extra effort of activity increases the flow of lymph, preventing or reducing swelling and helping the body to rid itself of harmful substances, such as bacteria.

Managing lymphoedema can be a challenge. Being active not only helps reduce lymphatic swelling and prevent other complications; it helps individuals stay in control rather than allowing lymphoedema to control their daily lives. On top of that, regular activity strengthens muscles, keeps joints flexible, maintaining and improving range of movement, improving posture, body shape, confidence and independence.

Which activities are good for lymphoedema?

Research has shown that there are many sports that are both safe and beneficial for people with lymphoedema. These include swimming or water-based activities, Nordic pole-walking, aerobics, dragon boat racing, yoga and even weight-lifting. Walking fairly briskly is great for stimulating lymphatic function. In fact, anything which involves moving, stretching, breathing more deeply is good. It is important to discuss any plans for being more active with a lymphoedema practitioner or other knowledgeable professional, especially if you've been inactive for a while. See EveryBodyCan at thebls.com for more details.

Where can I exercise?

Many leisure centres offer free temporary and reduced fee memberships with professional trainer guidance and support. Ask your GP, lymphoedema practitioner or local leisure centre about this. There are also many local voluntary groups and websites that might give you some ideas, motivation and support in getting more active.

Being active doesn't necessarily mean hitting the gym though. You can also keep yourself active and healthy by doing more of 'everyday' activities in the home or garden and being more aware of avoiding long periods of sitting still. Take every opportunity to move and stretch. There are lots of tips on thebls.com.

Extreme or contact sports

If your chosen activity has a high risk of injury to the skin, e.g. contact sports, you may need to take some precautions to reduce the likelihood of injury. Make sure you always clean any wounds and have a supply of prophylactic antibiotics in case an infection occurs.

Tip on getting started

- It's important to build up any activity gradually. Too much activity, for too long, progressed too quickly may increase swelling. If that happens, reduce the amount or intensity of activity until it goes down, then start building up again.
- The right amount of activity is different for everyone so monitor any effect of activity on swelling by regularly checking the affected area. Even if you are very active, intense activity may increase swelling temporarily, but as long as it goes back down within 24 hours, there is no need to cut back on activity.
- A few people find a particular activity may worsen any swelling. This doesn't mean you can't be active – just experiment with a different type of activity.
- It's normal to become slightly out of breath when you are challenging your body to be more active than usual. However, if it becomes unreasonably uncomfortable, take a rest before doing more. If it persists, seek advice from your specialist practitioner or GP.

Don't forget

- If you have been prescribed a compression garment, always wear these when being active and make sure these are a good fit.
- Breathe deeply to encourage better circulation of blood and lymph.
- Build up gradually. If you notice swelling becomes worse, stop the activity until the swelling goes back down. You can restart, but take it a bit slower and easier.
- Whatever your activity, do it regularly. If you are unable to do it for a long period, when you restart, do so slowly and gradually.
- **Take a break!** Don't be too hard on yourself or exercise for too long. Short, regular periods of activity with rests in between are better than long periods of activity, especially if you are not used to it. Alternatively, try something different – varying the activity is better than doing the same movements repeatedly, so that different muscles are worked and rested.

