

## Managing your risk of lymphoedema after breast cancer treatment.

This advice is for patients at risk of developing lymphoedema after breast cancer treatment. It gives you information about what lymphoedema is and what you can do to reduce your risk of developing this condition.

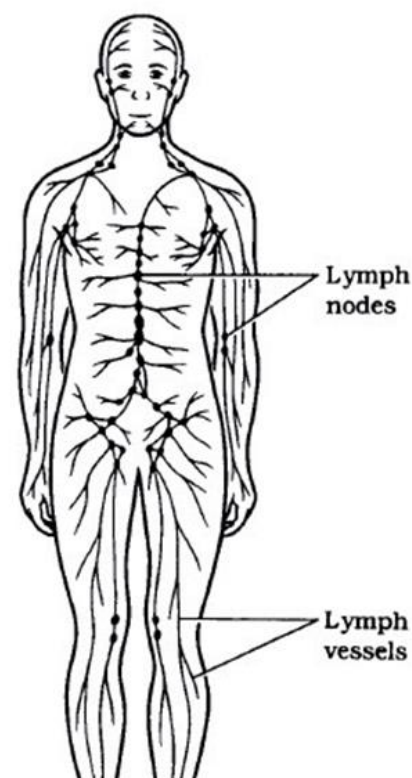
### What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a swelling in the tissues below the skin that occurs when the lymphatic fluid cannot drain away. Lymph nodes are removed as part of cancer surgery and this can block the normal drainage pathway. Lymphatic vessels and nodes can also be damaged by the cancer and by the scarring that follows after surgery or radiotherapy. In lymphoedema, fluid is dammed behind the blockage and builds up in the surrounding tissues causing swelling.

### A little bit about the lymphatic system

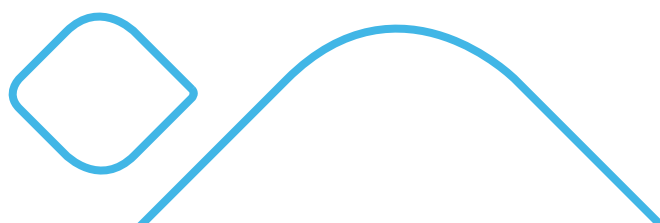
To understand lymphoedema you need to know a little bit about the lymphatic system.

The lymphatic system is a network of vessels (tubes) and nodes (glands) that cover the body and drain fluid from the tissues into the bloodstream. The lymph vessels collect extra fluid, protein and waste material from the body tissues and transport it via the lymph nodes back into the blood. The lymph nodes filter the fluid of any unwanted material and make special cells that help the body fight infection.



### How to reduce your risk of developing lymphoedema

If you have had surgery and/or radiotherapy to some or all the lymph nodes you are at risk of developing lymphoedema. You are more at risk if you have had the lymph nodes removed from your armpit (axillary node clearance) but if you have had a sentinel lymph node biopsy you are still at risk.



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Lymphoedema can happen anywhere on the affected side of your upper body. This can be your arm, breast, chest or back. There are things that you can do to reduce this risk.

All this advice aims to reduce the strain on your lymphatic system which has been compromised by the treatment. **Try to follow this advice for life as lymphoedema is a chronic condition and may occur any time after treatment.**

## **Try to avoid infection and injury**

The skin is covered in germs and a break in the skin can let germs in. With fewer lymph nodes there is a decreased ability to fight off germs and this can lead to an increased risk of developing an infection in the affected area. An infection could trigger the start of lymphoedema. So, try to:

- Wear long sleeves and gloves when gardening
- Wear gloves for washing up
- Take care when cutting nails
- Wear insect repellent to avoid bites
- Take care whilst shaving use an electric shaver as razors can cut the skin
- Avoid acupuncture to the affected side
- Try to avoid pet scratches
- There is no statistical evidence that having injections or blood taken from your 'at risk' arm causes lymphoedema, however it is advised to use your other arm. If it is necessary to use your at-risk arm, it is advised that this is not done regularly and only if really necessary.

If you do break the skin wash the area carefully, apply an antiseptic cream and cover with a plaster.

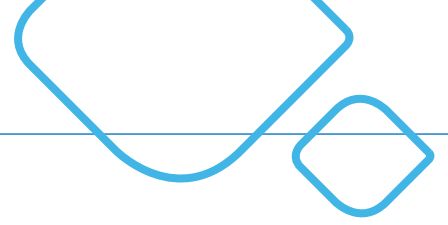
Watch for signs of infection: rash, pain, warmth, redness, sudden swelling or fever.

If you have any of these symptoms, please consult your GP immediately who will prescribe antibiotics. If you are going on holiday where it may be difficult to get antibiotics, ask your GP to prescribe some before you go in case of infection.

## **Try to maintain a healthy weight**

Try to maintain a healthy weight as weight gain can increase your risk of developing lymphoedema.

Eating a healthy diet and doing some regular physical activity can help you maintain a healthy weight.



## Exercise

Exercise is important to prevent lymphoedema as muscle pumps help lymphatic fluid to drain which can prevent swelling from occurring.

Try to use your arm and shoulder as normally as possible and take regular exercise. Try not to overtire the arm at risk. If it starts to ache, rest.

Avoid activities which put a very heavy strain on your arm such as carrying heavy weights (i.e. shopping bags, suitcases), moving furniture, and heavy gardening tasks.

Recreational exercise such as swimming, walking, yoga, Pilates or going to the gym can help your lymphatic system.

Whatever exercise you choose build up the amount you do gradually and use your arm and chest as a guide to how much you can do.

Once a day continue to do the exercises that you were given after surgery, unless you replace them with something else.

In addition, these 3 exercises are good to do several times during the day, or if you have been sitting for a while.

1. Bend and straighten your elbow
2. Circle your wrist in one direction, then the other direction
3. Make a fist, then relax your hand and straighten your fingers.

## Keep your skin in good condition

Try to keep your skin clean, soft and moisturised. Wash with a mild soap that won't dry your skin. After washing pat dry rather than rub and apply an unperfumed moisturiser in an upwards direction (not round and round).

## Try to avoid things that are too tight

Whilst there is no statistical evidence, try to avoid wearing tight sleeves, jewellery, or watches on the affected arm. Try to carry your handbag on the other shoulder.

Do wear a well-fitting bra preferably one that does not mark the skin. Seam free cups that support the whole breast, wide straps, wide underarm and no underwire are recommended as this may help lymph drainage.

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## Try to avoid over heating

In hot weather try to stay in the shade or cover up the affected area. Avoid long periods in very hot baths or showers, saunas and steam rooms. Always wear a high factor sunscreen (spf30 or above).

## Avoid excessive pressure

Whilst there is no statistical evidence, excessive pressure can exacerbate or trigger lymphoedema. You are advised not to have any deep tissue massage over the affected areas (try a facial or head massage instead). There are Therapists who are trained to work with people who are at risk of lymphoedema, please ask for further advice.

Avoid having your blood pressure taken from the affected arm.

Try not to sleep on the affected side as this restricts lymphatic flow.

### Additional advice for people who have had axillary node surgery to both sides:

- It is best to not use the arms at all to have blood pressure monitored. Blood pressure can be measured from your leg using a large cuff and this must be done lying down. If this cannot be done use your non dominant side.
- Blood can be taken from a vein in your ankle or foot. If this is not possible use your non dominant/ least affected side and ensure your skin is cleaned before the blood is taken and covered with a plaster afterwards.
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## Signs and symptoms of lymphoedema

- a feeling of tightness in your arm/breast/chest wall/back
- a feeling of fullness or pressure
- the sensation of swelling which can often be present even before the swelling is seen
- puffiness, swelling or any increase in the size of your arm or anywhere on that side of your chest or back
- a bursting sensation
- aching or heaviness in your arm, chest or back.

There are several reasons other than lymphoedema which may cause swelling. If you notice any of the signs listed above contact your GP, consultant or specialist nurse.

## Lymphoedema Risk Management

- In addition to the information in this leaflet you can attend a risk management appointment or group. Please phone or email the clinic if you would like to book one.
- You can contact the clinic directly if you are experiencing any signs of swelling. Please phone or email to book an appointment time.
- The Cancer Rehab Team offer exercise groups including hydrotherapy which can help with reducing the risk of lymphoedema. Please phone 01225 825596 or email [ruh-tr.cancerrehab@nhs.net](mailto:ruh-tr.cancerrehab@nhs.net) for more information.

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[www.ruh.nhs.uk/lymphoedema](http://www.ruh.nhs.uk/lymphoedema)

## Further Information



Lymphoedema Support Network

[www.lymphoedema.org](http://www.lymphoedema.org)

[www.breastcancernow.org/about-breast-cancer/treatment/lymphoedema/](http://www.breastcancernow.org/about-breast-cancer/treatment/lymphoedema/)



<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/lymphoedema>

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If you would like this leaflet in email form, large print, braille or another language, please contact the Patient Support team on 01225 825656.

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