

Lymphoedema

Breast Care Centre
Information for patients

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The lymphatic system

The lymphatic system is a transport system closely linked to the blood circulation system. The lymph fluid is transported through the lymphatic system and finally empties into veins which connect the lymphatic system with the blood vessel system. Lymph fluid is a water and protein mixture.

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a chronic swelling which can affect your arm following treatment for breast cancer. The lymphatic system can be damaged by the scarring caused by surgery and radiotherapy which leads to lymph drainage being interrupted. In some cases the body finds ways of compensating for this. For example, it can stimulate existing lymph vessels to increase their workload.

Depending on how well the body compensates and how much stress the lymphatic system is under lymphoedema may not develop. However, lymphoedema can develop soon after breast cancer treatment or there can be a delay of several years. It can start or become worse after an infection in the arm. If you have lymphoedema you may experience a gradual heavy and uncomfortable swelling in your arm and/or hand. The arm may be described as heavy, tight or firm and it often aches as the day progresses. The swelling and heaviness can restrict movement and cause discomfort. You may notice that the skin and tissues in the region of the swelling have become different. When the lymphatic system can no longer work effectively there is a build up of water and protein in the tissues which results in the skin becoming dry and thickened.

Aim of treatment

Once damaged the lymphatic system cannot be repaired, which means lymphoedema cannot be cured. It can, however, be controlled. Treatment is aimed at encouraging other healthy parts of the lymphatic system to work more efficiently, thereby draining extra fluid from the swollen area.

**Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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To give feedback about this information sheet, contact InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk

What is the treatment?

The management of mild lymphoedema is very much focused on you the patient undertaking the recommended treatment and it requires commitment.

There are four main elements in the treatment of lymphoedema:

- Skin care
- Exercise
- Massage
- Compression

The four different elements of the treatment should be carried out regularly every day. No one aspect of treatment works well on its own. It may take several weeks before you notice a difference in the size of your arm or hand but it should gradually begin to feel more comfortable.

Skin care

The skin of a swollen limb is fragile and susceptible to damage and infection. The lymph fluid in your swollen arm is an ideal place for germs to multiply, increasing the risk for developing an infection (cellulitis). The skin of the affected arm(s) tends to be dry and small cracks may appear. Broken, cracked or dry skin can be an entry point for germs. It is therefore very important to keep your skin soft, supple and intact to act as a barrier. This can be achieved by following this advice:

- Dry carefully between fingers after washing hands
- Use a soap substitute such as aqueous cream to prevent drying of the skin. This can be purchased at chemists
- Apply a bland moisturiser (Cetraben®, DiproBase®) to the skin at bed time. These can be purchased at chemists
- Treat cuts, scratches, burns, and insect bites promptly by cleaning well and applying an antiseptic. See your GP if the area becomes red and inflamed
- Use insect repellent to avoid bites
- Wear gloves when doing jobs like gardening, and use a thimble when sewing
- Use nail clippers rather than scissors when cutting finger nails
- Use high factor sunscreen (minimum factor 15) to prevent sunburn
- Use an electric razor when shaving unwanted under-arm hair
- Avoid having injections or blood tests in your swollen arm
- Avoid having your blood pressure checked in your swollen arm
- Avoid carrying heavy items
- Avoid tight clothing and jewellery
- Avoid hot baths / showers / saunas
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Cellulitis

Cellulitis is an infection caused by bacteria which affects the skin and tissues underneath it. The infection may enter through a break in the skin such as an insect bite or scratch or through an area of skin inflammation such as eczema. Sometimes it may not be possible to identify any cause and the attack may arise without warning.

Signs and symptoms of cellulitis may include:

- the swollen arm becoming red, hot and tender to touch
- a rash
- your arm becoming more swollen
- feeling unwell with flu symptoms such as fever, shivers, headache and aches and pains.

If you suspect that you may be developing cellulitis you must see your GP **straight away** as you will need to have a course of antibiotics to treat the infection. Some people may have repeated attacks of cellulitis and may need to be treated with long-term antibiotics.

Until the infection gets better you should remove any compression garments, discontinue simple lymphatic drainage and exercises and rest the arms as much as possible.

Exercise

Exercise plays an important part in encouraging fluid to drain. The lymphatic system does not have a pump. Fluid is moved out of the limbs and back into the lymphatic system by muscle contraction. However, very vigorous exercise causes more blood flow through the limb and leads to more fluid forming in the tissues. It is important to do enough exercise to prevent fluid from collecting but not so much that the swelling increases. Gentle regular exercise every day is better than occasional bursts of intense exercise. Activities such as ironing and vacuuming can put a lot of strain on the swollen arm. It is therefore best to do a little of these activities at a time and to change hands where possible.

You should use your swollen arm as normally as possible as restricting movement can lead to joint stiffness. Activities which involve holding the limb in one position can cause the swelling to increase. You should avoid lifting, carrying, pushing or pulling heavy objects. Swimming is an excellent form of exercise. If you wear a compression sleeve you should wear it whilst exercising as this will help to encourage the fluid to drain away (please do not wear the sleeve whilst swimming).

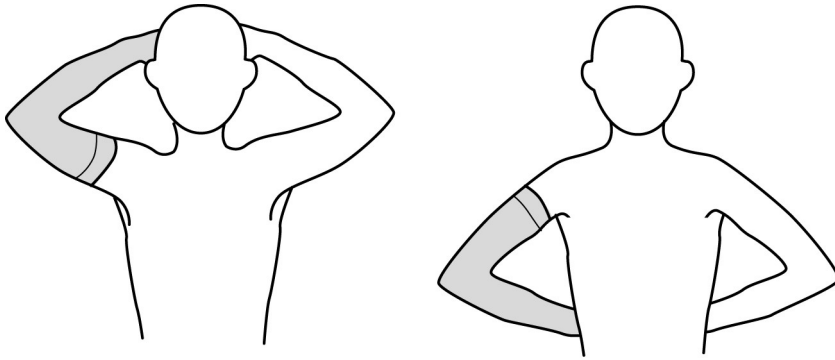
Exercise should be gentle and regular. If supplied, always wear your compression hosiery during exercise.

Exercise (continued)

You should try to do the following six exercises once or twice a day.

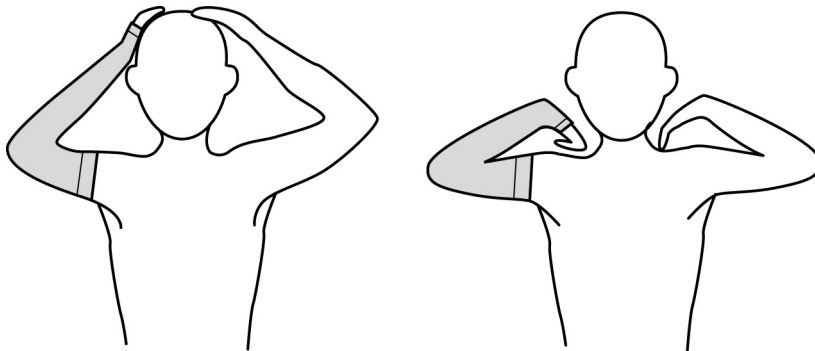
The first three exercises are to keep the shoulder joint mobile and prevent stiffness.

1.



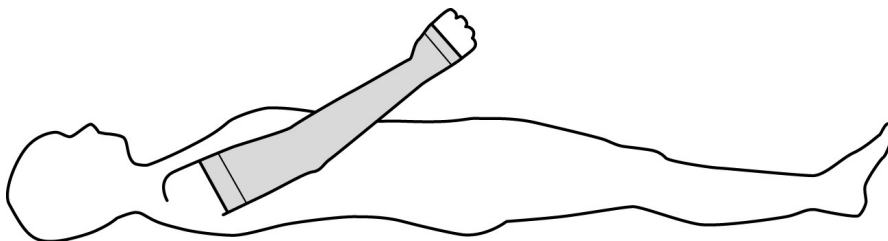
Start with your hands behind your head. Slowly lower your arms and place them behind your back. Repeat ten times.

2.



Place your hands on top of your head, then slowly bring down to touch your shoulders. Repeat ten times.

3.

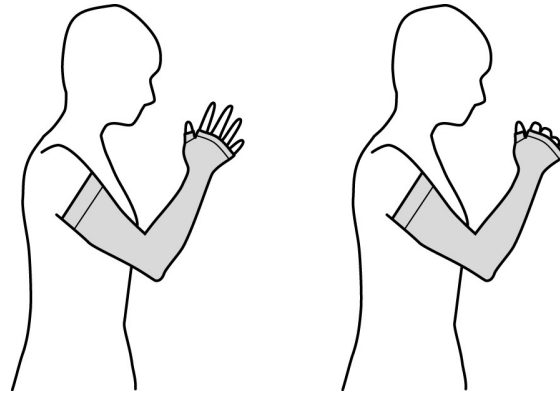


Lie flat on a bed. Clasp hands together and lift arms straight up as far as they will go. Repeat ten times.

Exercise (continued)

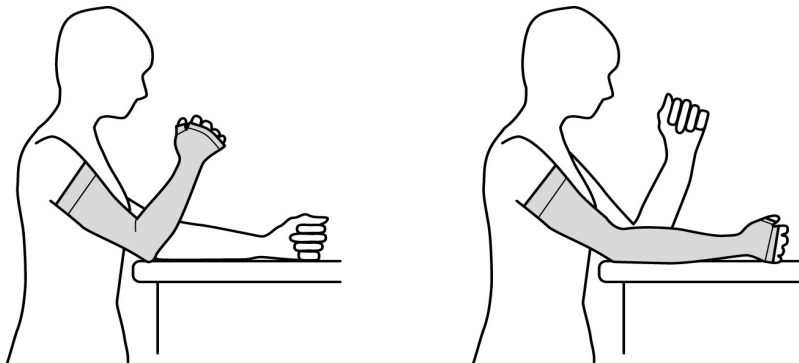
The following three exercises are to work the muscles in the swollen arm, thus stimulating drainage of the lymph fluid.

4.



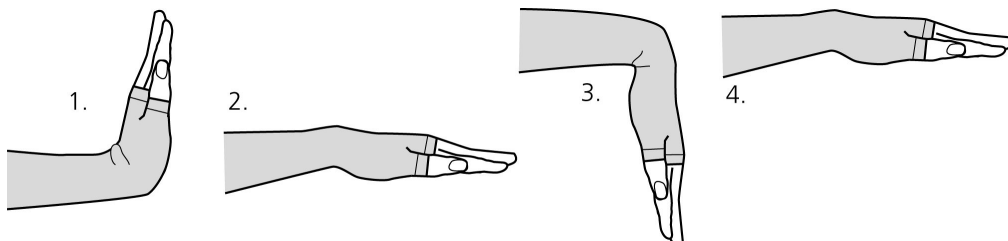
Slowly spread your fingers apart as far as they will go. Hold for a slow count of two then slowly relax. Repeat ten times.

5.



Slowly and firmly straighten your arm then bend at the elbow until it will go no further. Repeat ten times.

6.



Slowly and firmly bend upwards at the wrist, bringing your hand back as far as possible. Then slowly bend your wrist down, fingers pointing downwards. Repeat ten times.

Massage

The massage used in the treatment of mild lymphoedema is called Simple Lymphatic Drainage (SLD).

Massage is used to encourage fluid away from the swollen arm to areas where it can drain away normally. There are many massage techniques and the one described in this leaflet is specific to the treatment of lymphoedema.

SLD is performed with the fingers or the flat of the hand. The amount of pressure used is very important. Apply just enough pressure to cause the skin to move slightly. Use a stroking action rather than pressing downwards. If the skin becomes red, too much pressure is being used. The skin must be dry and free from oils or creams.

Before you begin, position yourself comfortably lying down. It is important to follow the sequence as described.

All movements should be slow and gentle.

Massage should be discontinued if the skin becomes red or if there is pain or discomfort.

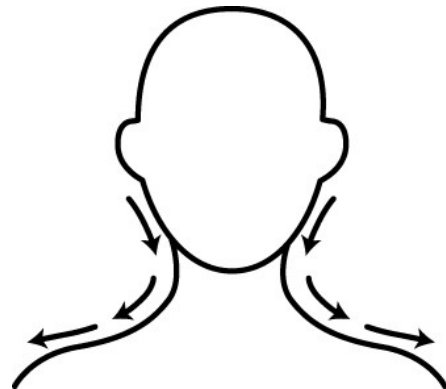
Cream should not be used during massage.

Start by taking five deep breaths, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.

All movements should be repeated five times unless otherwise stated.

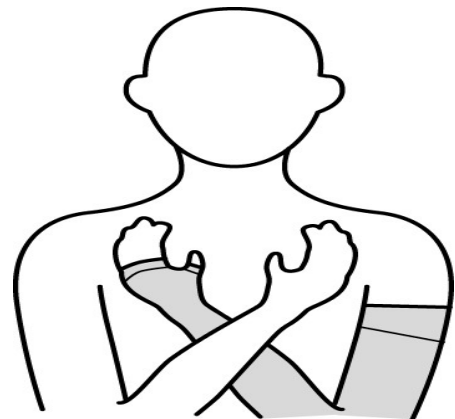
Working on the neck and collar bone

Working on the neck



Make gentle stroking movements downwards to both sides of your neck in the direction of the arrows.

Working just above the collar bone

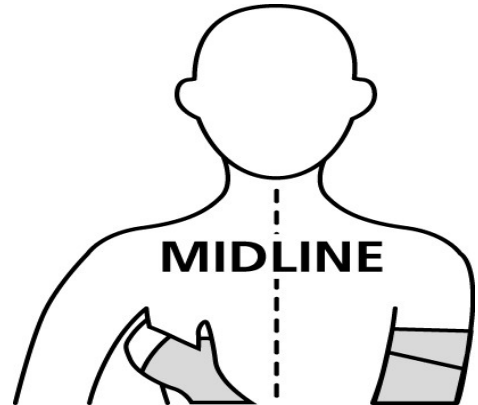


With your arms crossed, feel for the hollow just above the collar bone. Make short stroking movements along the line of your collar bone towards the middle.

Massage (continued)

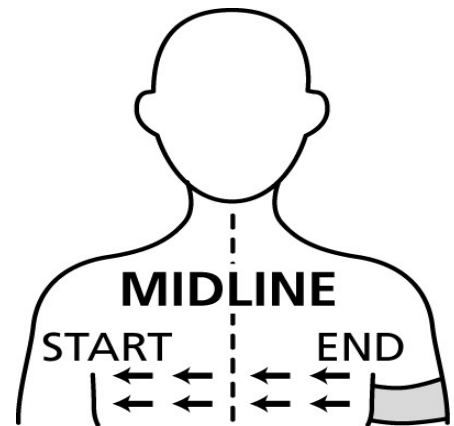
Working on the under arm and chest wall

Working under the arm on the non-swollen side only



In the armpit on the non swollen side, use light pressure to gently stretch the skin up into the armpit.

Working on the chest wall



Starting on your chest close to your unaffected arm, massage across your chest towards your unaffected arm at the arrow points as shown on the diagram. Massage in the direction of the arrows. Work your way across your chest, always massaging in the direction of the arrows. You may find it more comfortable to change hands in the middle.

Finally, complete the following breathing exercises

Place both hands high on your abdomen, overlapping the lower ribs. Rest your fingers on the gap between your ribs at the front. Without arching your back, breathe in slowly and deeply. You should feel your fingers rise as your abdomen expands. Hold for a slow count of two, and then breathe out slowly. Repeat this four times. Then relax for a couple of minutes before getting up.

Compression

Compression hosiery in the form of sleeves or gloves can be used in the management of arm lymphoedema. Hosiery provides graduated compression which helps to:

- Reduce the accumulation of fluid in the limb
- Enhance the pumping action of the muscles
- Encourage fluid to move towards the top of the arm and back into the bloodstream.

Following assessment you may be fitted with a compression garment if it is felt to be appropriate.

You should put on your garment first thing in the morning before you stand up and remove it last thing at night. When you first start to wear the compression hosiery it may feel strange. You may find it easier to wear it for a few hours on the first day and gradually increase the time that you wear it each day.

You will be supplied with two garments which should be worn equally and it is important to follow the manufacturer's washing instructions. Replacement garments will be supplied about every six months.

Your compression garment should feel firm, supportive and comfortable. If you experience:

- Unexplained breathlessness
- A change in colour or temperature of your fingers
- Pins and needles
- Numbness in your arm / hand
- Pain in your arm

You should remove your compression garment immediately and contact the Clinical Nurse Specialists (Breast Care Nurses) for advice on 0116 250 2513.

When applying your garment ensure there are no wrinkles or creases and do not turn or roll the top over. This would prevent movement of fluid and may damage your skin.

It is important to wear your compression garment in warmer weather when swelling can increase. Periods of immobility on long journeys can increase swelling. Therefore you should always wear your compression garment on long journeys and if possible exercise every hour as muscle movement encourages fluid drainage.

Follow up

Successful management of lymphoedema is based upon compliance with the advised therapies and the commitment of patients to undertake these daily as recommended. The advised three or four components of treatment work in conjunction with each other to provide the maximum effect in reducing or controlling your lymphoedema.

Patients who do not attend their appointments on two consecutive occasions will be discharged.

Following initial assessment we aim to provide maintenance treatment for up to two years. We do discharge before two years if appropriate. Once your lymphoedema is stable and you are able to self-manage you will be considered for discharge back to the care of your GP. If compression garments are still required your GP will be provided with details of what to prescribe: your GP will need to complete an FP10 prescription.

If any problems arise in the future your GP can refer you back to the lymphoedema clinic.

Local lymphoedema support group and contacts

Leicestershire Lymphoedema Support Group:

www.leicesterlymph.org.uk

The Lymphoedema support network (LSN):

www.lymphoedema.org

The British Lymphology Society (BLS):

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