



University Hospitals Birmingham
NHS Foundation Trust



Understanding Lymphoedema

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What is Lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a term used to describe swelling in a limb, and may occur in the arm of patients treated for breast cancer. It is a chronic condition, so there is no cure but it is controllable with appropriate treatment. If ignored the condition can gradually deteriorate and then it takes longer to control.

How does Lymphoedema occur?

Lymphoedema occurs in the arm or breast when there is a disruption to the lymphatic system. Normally, lymph fluid carries away waste products from the tissues and circulation and so helps to protect the body from infections and injuries. These waste products are then filtered through the lymphatic network towards the neck, where they drain back into the blood stream and eventually passed out as urine. If there is damage to the lymphatic system, then the lymph fluid is unable to drain from one or more areas of the body, and this results in swelling. Sometimes the drainage is just a little less efficient, so mild swelling can occur. Occasionally, the problem can be more serious.

Damage to the lymphatic system can be caused by scarring to the lymphatic vessels following:

- Injury
- Infection
- Surgery
- Radiotherapy

Swelling can develop weeks, months or even years after breast cancer treatment and it is difficult to predict who will be affected. However, we do know that those who are over-weight, have had an infection after surgery or long standing seroma are at greater risk of developing lymphoedema.

How will it affect you?

The swelling may be slight or severe and can cause various problems:

- Heavy or full sensation
- Tightness and stretching of the skin
- Reduced movement of the arm

- Aching and discomfort

You may notice swelling in the arm because your rings, watch, or clothing feel tighter.

What is the treatment if you have Lymphoedema

The aim of treatment is to reduce the swelling, prevent further build up of fluid and relieve discomfort.

There are four main components to treatment:

- Skin care
- Exercise
- Support using compression arm sleeve, or the use of compression bandaging
- A particular type of massage called Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD) or Simple Lymphatic Drainage (SLD) which you may wish to perform for yourself.

These therapies need to be done every day to achieve the best results.

Preventative advice

Skin care (to maintain good tissue condition and reduce the risk of infection)

- Wash and dry the area thoroughly, paying particular attention in between the fingers
- Apply moisturizing cream daily to the limb – aqueous cream is cheap and effective
- Avoid blood sampling or injections on the affected limb
- Avoid having your blood pressure taken on the affected limb
- If you injure the affected limb apply an antiseptic cream and observe closely for redness, heat or swelling as this may indicate an infection. If this happens you will need to see your doctor to get antibiotics prescribed straight away
- Wear gloves for gardening and washing up
- Take care when handling pets, so that you don't get scratched or bitten

- Do not wet shave the limb concerned, use an electric razor or hair removal cream in case you cut yourself

Exercise and Movement (to maximise lymph drainage)

- Use the limb normally
- Avoid heavy lifting, and pushing or pulling of heavy objects
- Avoid prolonged lifting of the arm above the shoulder, which may reduce the drainage into the neck e.g. painting and decorating
- Carry a handbag on your unaffected shoulder. Rucksacks should have broad straps
- Continue with the exercises given to you in hospital four times a week for life to maintain good joint mobility
- Exercises should be performed slowly, gently and rhythmically
- Swimming, yoga and tai chi are good exercise. They should be done without over exertion as this may encourage swelling

Remember that the best thing to protect your arm is to move it normally, so keeping your muscle tone, but to avoid very heavy or strenuous activities.

If you need any advice or if you should develop any swelling, it is important to contact your consultant or clinical nurse specialist straight away so you may be investigated and referred to an appropriate lymphoedema clinic in your area.

If you require this information in another format, such as a different language, large print, braille or audio version please ask a member of staff or email patientexperience@uhb.nhs.uk.

Breast Care

Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham: **0121 371 4499**

Solihull Hospital: **0121 424 5306**
