



**St Margaret's**  
Hospice Care

# Lymphoedema Service

## Living With Lymphoedema - Information



## What is Lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is the collection of fluid, called lymph, in the tissues of the body, causing abnormal swelling. It mainly affects the arms and legs.

Lymph is a colourless fluid that normally drains back into the blood system via a network of small vessels and lymph nodes or “glands”. These nodes, situated in the groin and under the arms, filter the lymph and help the body fight infection.

Lymphoedema may occur when the system that carries lymph is interrupted or damaged.

Things that may interrupt or damage the lymphatic system:

- Surgery
- Cancer and its related treatment - e.g. surgery, radiotherapy
- Infection, severe injury, burns
- A congenital or hereditary abnormality

**NOT ALL LYMPHOEDEMA IS CANCER RELATED**

## What is the treatment for Lymphoedema?

Below are listed the 4 key elements to the treatment. Although lymphoedema cannot be cured, it can be managed by a combination of these elements.

If there is to be any reduction in swelling your commitment to a self-care programme is vital.

### **Skin care (see opposite page)**

To reduce the risk of making the swelling worse, take special care not to injure your skin or introduce infection. Take extra care of your feet and toe nails if you have leg swelling.

### **Exercise**

Gentle exercise will activate the muscles, which help pump the lymph out of the limb. Keeping the limb still or strenuous exercise will increase the swelling.

### **Simple Lymph Drainage**

Simple lymph drainage is used to stimulate the drainage of lymph in the lymph vessels to other parts of the body.

### **Hosiery**

Wearing a specially designed garment will reduce the collection of lymph in your limb and assist the muscle pump.

## Skin care

### LOOK AFTER YOUR SKIN CAREFULLY

- Wash and dry the affected part well. Treat any fungal infection between your skin creases, fingers or toes
- Apply moisturising cream every night to the affected skin, to keep it supple, soft and healthy
- Protect your skin from injury. Wear protective clothing on the affected limb when working in the house or garden. e.g.rubber gloves/good footwear
- Clean all cuts and scratches immediately and apply antiseptic cream to avoid infection
- Avoid sunburn by using a high factor sun cream

## More advice

- Avoid lifting/carrying heavy loads if you have arm swelling
- Avoid injections, blood tests or blood pressure measurements on the affected limb
- Avoid wearing tight clothes around the armpit or groin of your affected limb
- Maintain a healthy weight

## Be aware of changes

If you notice any of the following changes please contact your GP immediately as they may accompany an acute inflammatory episode. This will require antibiotic treatment:

- Sudden increase in swelling
- Heaviness
- Flushing or hot, red skin
- Skin rashes
- Flu-like symptoms

*cont.*

## Holiday advice

When travelling abroad take a first aid kit containing the following items to help prevent further complications:

- Antiseptic
- Insect repellent
- High factor sun block
- Course of antibiotics from your GP

Remember that swelling tends to increase in hot weather, so this is when you most need to wear your compression hosiery. The sun can still burn you through your hosiery.

Further information can be obtained from: **Lymphoedema Support Network**, St. Luke's Crypt, Sydney Street, London, SW3 6NH. T: 020 7351 4480 [www.lymphoedema.org/lsn](http://www.lymphoedema.org/lsn)

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