

**St Margaret's**  
Hospice Care

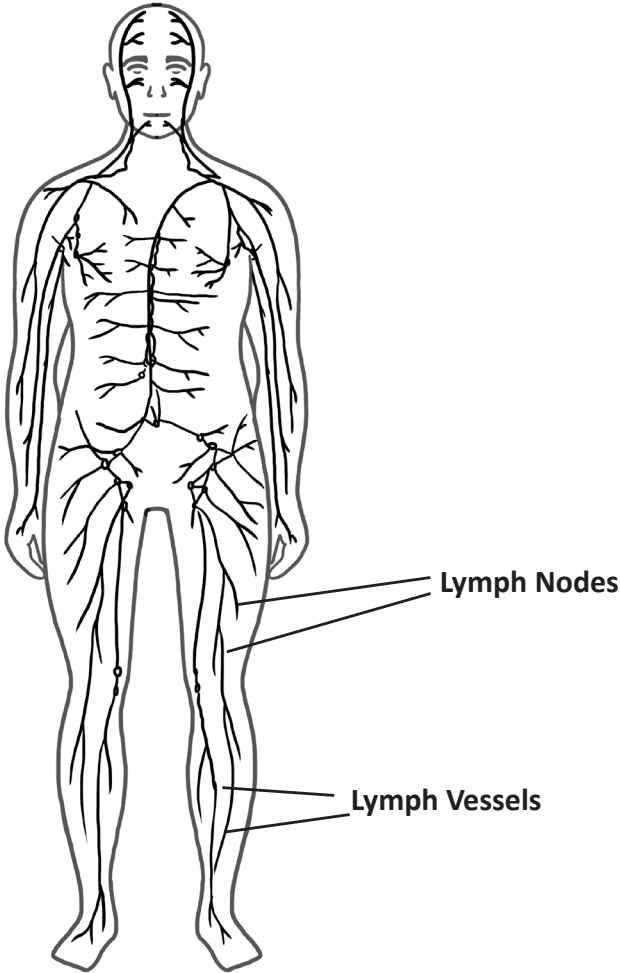
# **Lymphoedema Service**

## **Managing arm or breast swelling**



## Introduction

In order 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 blood stream. The lymph vessels collect extra fluid, protein and waste material from the body tissues and transport it through 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.



**the Lymphatic System**

## What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a swelling in the tissues below the skin that occurs when the lymphatic fluid cannot drain away. Lymphoedema can occur in the arm or trunk on the affected side of your body. This can happen if the lymphatic system is damaged or blocked. Similarly, if lymph nodes are removed as part of cancer surgery this can also block the normal drainage pathway. Lymphatic vessels and nodes can also be damaged by the cancer and any scarring that follows after surgery or radiotherapy. If lymphoedema fluid is dammed behind the blockage and builds up in the surrounding tissues this can result in tissue swelling.

Other causes that may interrupt or damage the Lymphatic system include:

- Surgery
- Infection
- Severe injury
- Burns
- A congenital or hereditary abnormality

### **NOT ALL LYMPHOEDEMA IS CANCER RELATED**

## How is lymphoedema managed?

We manage lymphoedema in a structured way. Below are listed the 4 key elements to the treatment we recommend. Although lymphoedema cannot be cured, it can be managed by a combination of these essential elements:

- Skin Care (see advice) - To reduce the risk of making the swelling worse, take care not to injure your skin or introduce infection
- Exercise - Gentle exercise will activate the muscles which help pump lymph fluid out. Keeping still or over exercising will increase 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 - If appropriate, wearing a specially designed garment will reduce the collection of lymph fluid and assist your muscles to pump it away

## Taking care of your skin

Good skin care plays a vital part in the treatment of swollen or at risk areas. Stretched skin can become dry and cracked and any break or injury to the skin is a potential entry for bacteria which thrive in the warm, protein-rich fluid of the swelling.

**Prevention of infection** in the skin tissues is of great importance. Not only is an infection unpleasant and painful, but it may also cause the swelling to get worse.

Any infection should be treated promptly within a two week course of antibiotics. So if you think you may be developing an infection **see your doctor immediately**. If you do have an infection, discontinue the use of any hosiery until pain and swelling resolves and stop massage or exercise until it is better.

Some people who suffer repeated infections may be prescribed a small but continuous course of antibiotics over a long period of time as a preventative treatment. If infection tends to be a problem, it may be advisable to take an emergency supply of antibiotics with you, especially if you are going on holiday, just in case they are needed. Your doctor or lymphoedema nurse will advise you.

You may hear the term acute inflammatory episode (AIE) or cellulitis. These are commonly used words which refer to an infection of the skin tissues.

## Tips for good skin care

- Wash and dry the at risk area daily, particularly between folds of skin, fingers and armpits
- Inspect the at risk area daily, looking out for any breaks in the skin or signs of infection
- Treat even the smallest injuries, clean well and apply antiseptic solution
- Moisturise the swollen or at risk area daily using a product recommended by the therapist or nurse. Usually this is done in the evening when the hosiery has been removed
- Avoid creams and soaps that contain perfumes and additives. Doublebase gel is recommended to moisturise your skin. Aqueous cream can be used instead of soap

- Avoid burns and sunburn, protect your skin from the sun
- Avoid scratches from animals
- Avoid insect bites, use an effective insect repellent (e.g. on holiday, in the garden)
- Take great care when cutting nails on the affected side
- Wear rubber gloves for household chores and washing up
- Wear gloves or protective clothing for gardening
- Use an electric razor for removing unwanted hair
- Use a thimble for sewing
- Don't have injections, blood tests, blood pressure readings or acupuncture done on affected areas
- Avoid hot baths and showers
- Avoid restrictive clothing
- Try not to wear an under wire or tight bra that could cause sore areas on or under the breast
- **Do keep moving and undertake light tasks.**

## Hints for positioning movement

- Do not carry heavy bags on your affected side e.g. shopping etc.
- Carry your handbag on the other shoulder or in the other hand
- Go easy on heavy housework and gardening
- Avoid using your arm in one position for a long time on the affected side
- Avoid over exertion, do not strain and do not be over vigorous
- When sitting, rest your swollen limb fully supported on cushions on the chair arm and try to keep it fairly straight
- When walking try not to let your arm hang by your side. Try to exercise your arm a little as you go along e.g. hand pumping, elbow bending or try rolling a small pebble or marble in your pocket
- Some people find they get relief by resting their limb on a pillow in bed, this may be worth a try if you find it difficult to get comfortable
- Swimming is a useful exercise and will be especially beneficial if you wear your hosiery (an old one is a good idea as the chlorine can damage the fabric)

**Special Instructions:**

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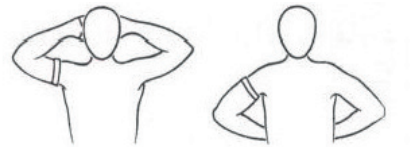
### Exercises

Exercise is important for helping to drain fluid since muscles help to pump lymph out of the limb. Very vigorous exercise, however, causes an increased blood supply consequently forming more fluid in the tissues. Try to do gentle regular exercise rather than intensive bursts, normally twice a day is ideal. Do the exercises slowly, rhythmically and gently.

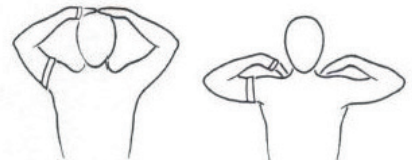
**Remember to wear your hosiery when you are exercising.**

The following exercises are designed to help keep your shoulder joint mobile and prevent stiffness and to stimulate drainage in the swollen area by working the muscles. Try about 10 repetitions of each exercise:

1. Place hands behind neck then slowly bring hands down in front of the body then behind the waste.



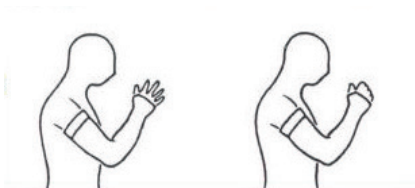
2. Place hands on top of head then slowly bring down to touch shoulders.



3. Lie or stand for this one - Clasp hands together and lift arms straight up as far as possible.



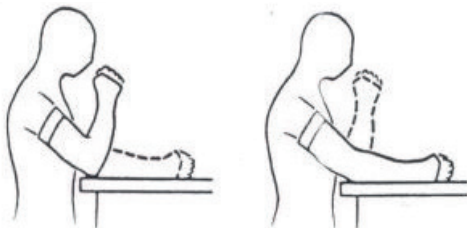
4. Slowly and firmly spread the fingers, hold for a count of 2 and then relax.



5. Slowly and firmly flex the wrist, bringing the hand back as far as it will go, then slowly flex the wrist the opposite way pointing the fingers towards the floor.



6. Slowly and firmly bend and straighten the arm supporting the elbow if necessary.



## Guidelines for wearing hosiery

A compression hosiery is worn to help limit the formation of lymph fluid and to provide resistance against which the muscles can pump and move the fluid more effectively. Hosiery may help to reduce the swelling and maintain the reduction:

- Apply hosiery early in the morning, wear all day and remove when you go to bed
- If you have very mild oedema you may have been advised that it is only necessary to wear your hosiery occasionally or for part of the day.

**Make sure that you wear it during activity** e.g. gardening, housework, sport, walking

- Use rubber gloves when applying hosiery, either latex or household gloves. This gives you a better grip on the hosiery and helps prevent tearing or laddering
- Ensure there are no creases or wrinkles. The hosiery should feel firm, supportive and comfortable
- Do not fold hosiery over at the top
- Try not to apply hosiery directly after you have applied moisturising cream, this makes it 'sticky' to get on and may damage the fabric of the garment
- Please check the skin colour, warmth and sensation when wearing the hosiery. If you notice a change of colour, warmth or any new tingling, numbness, cramp, throbbing, pins and needles, pain or shortness of breath - remove the hosiery and contact the lymphoedema nurse immediately
- Please do not cut, stitch or alter your hosiery in any way
- Hosiery should be replaced every 6 months. Please contact us if it becomes worn, laddered or loose in the meantime
- If you find your hosiery tightens during the day, think about your movements, too much activity or too much rest can increase swelling. If you do work hard, rest for at least 30 minutes or if you have been resting take gentle exercise. If it continues to be too tight, please remove it and get in contact with us
- Check the area for soreness or blistering when you remove your hosiery. If you have any problems with your skin (e.g. breaks or injury) please contact us as it may be inadvisable to wear hosiery
- Please follow the manufacturer's recommended washing instructions and remember to let your hosiery dry naturally - not on a radiator or in a tumble dryer
- You should be supplied with 2 garments. Please wear them evenly as failure to do so may give different control to the oedema (one to wash and one to wear)
- If you are unfortunate to have an infection/acute inflammatory episode/cellulitis please **remove your hosiery** until the pain and swelling has reduced
- If you go swimming wear your hosiery if you feel you can, as you will get more benefit from the exercise. Use an older garment
- **Please remember, if you have any problems or questions about your hosiery contact your lymphoedema nurse**

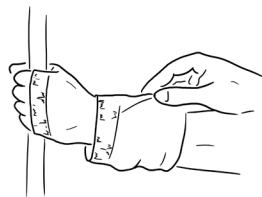
## Step by step diagrams - Arm sleeve



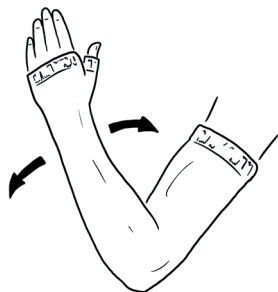
1. Invert sleeve to about half way.



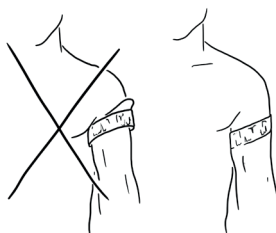
2. Pull over hand.



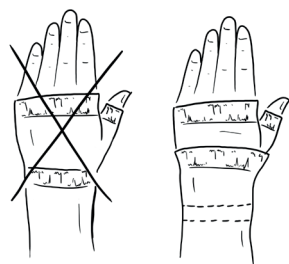
3. Hold on to something fixed (e.g. towel rail). Ease sleeve up arm, working from the bottom upwards.



4. Check that sleeve sits evenly and smoothly. It should not restrict movement.



5. Don't pull sleeve up so high that the top wrinkles over.



6. If mitten and sleeve are separate, ensure that there is a good overlap and that neither edge sits in the wrist crease.

## Sources of information and support

### Breast Cancer Care

Kiln House, 210 New Kings Road, London, SW6 4NZ

Tel: Freephone Helpline 0808 800 6000

(Monday - Friday, 10am - 5pm) (Saturday, 10am - 2pm)

Website: [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

*An organisation offering information and support to those affected by breast cancer and the effects of treatment.*

### Macmillan Cancer Relief

89 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7UQ

Tel: 020 7840 7840 Macmillan Cancerline: 0808 808 2020 (freephone)

Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

*Provides free information and emotional support for people living with cancer and information about UK cancer support groups and organisations.*

### MLD UK

P.O. Box 14491, Glenrothes, Fife, KY6 3YE

Tel: 01592 748008

Website: [www.mlduk.org.uk](http://www.mlduk.org.uk)

*An organisation which will help you to find a manual lymph drainage therapist in your area.*

### Disabled Living Foundation

380-384 Harrow Road, London, W9 2HU

Tel: Helpline (local rate) 0845 130 9177 (Monday - Friday 10am - 1pm)

Textphone: 0870 603 9176

Website: [www.dlf.org.uk](http://www.dlf.org.uk)

*National resource for information about equipment to help people with a disability carry out daily living activities.*

### British Association for Lymphoedema Support Network (LSN)

St Luke's Crypt, Sydney Street, London, SW3 6NH

Helpline: 020 7351 4480 Fax: 020 7349 9809

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

*The LSN is a national charity that provides telephone information and support to people with lymphoedema. It also produces a quarterly newsletter and a wide range of fact sheets.*

**St Margaret's Hospice Care Taunton Hospice,**  
Heron Drive, Bishops Hull, Taunton, TA1 5HA

 01823 333822

**St Margaret's Hospice Care Yeovil Hospice,**  
Little Tarrat Lane, Yeovil, BA20 2HU

 01935 709480

 [CRC@st-margarets-hospice.org.uk](mailto:CRC@st-margarets-hospice.org.uk)

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St Margaret's Hospice Care is committed to taking your privacy seriously and protecting your personal information. If you want to know more about how we use your data go on the 'privacy statement' on our website or ask for a copy of this information via [info@st-margarets-hospice.org.uk](mailto:info@st-margarets-hospice.org.uk)

Please note all incoming and outgoing calls may be recorded for training and quality purposes.

Publication date: May 2018

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Registered Charity No: 279473



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