

Lymphoedema of the arm

Information and Advice



Care. Compassion. Community.

The Prince of Wales Hospice

Lymphoedema Clinic
Halfpenny Lane
Pontefract
West Yorkshire
WF8 4BG

Contact Number: 01977 781459

Clinic Times

Monday, Thursday, Friday
09.00 – 17.00

Dewsbury

Tuesday
10:00 – 17:00

What is Lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a condition, which causes swelling anywhere in the body but mostly in the arms and legs. Lymphoedema occurs when the lymphatic system, which drains away fluid from the body tissues becomes damaged or overloaded and is no longer able to cope. As a consequence there is a build up of water and proteins in the tissues beneath the skin surface which causes changes in the skin and surrounding tissues. The affected part feels tight and firm and the limb may feel heavy and ache, especially as the day goes on. The condition may be primary due to an abnormality of the lymphatic system or secondary where the lymphatic system is damaged for example due to injury, surgery or infection. Lymphoedema cannot be cured but it can be controlled and kept to a minimum through treatment.

Who is a risk?

Anyone who has had a simple mastectomy, lumpectomy, radical mastectomy with axillary node dissection and/or radiation treatment. Lymphoedema can occur immediately post operatively, within a few months, a couple of years, or 20 years or more after cancer therapy. With proper education and care, lymphoedema can be avoided or, if it develops, can be kept under control.

Visit your doctor at once

- If you see any signs of inflammation on the swollen limb;
- if you see a spot resembling a small haemorrhage on your skin;
- if pain or muscle weakness occurs; or
- if the swelling become worse in spite of adequate treatment.

Do's and don'ts

In the home or at work

- Avoid injury, strain and exposure to extreme heat/cold.
- Wear rubber gloves for household chores.
- Take care with kitchen utensils, and when cooking and ironing.
- Care when sewing, use a thimble.
- Never wash in very hot water.
- Never carry a heavy bag with the affected arm.
- Do not smoke—if you must do not hold a burning cigarette in the hand at risk.
- Avoid wearing tight jewellery or a watch on the affected wrist.

Clothing

- Clothing should not be tight.
- Bra straps should not cut into the shoulder or the chest wall, if necessary use a pad under a bra strap.
- Skirts and belts should not be too tight.

Cosmetic or beauty treatment (hairdressers etc)

- Take care when cutting nails or having a manicure.
- Avoid cosmetics which irritate the skin.
- Take care when sunbathing – avoid sunburn.
- NO FIRM arm or body massages.
- Protect the shoulder/arm from the heating affects of hairdryers.

In the garden

- Wear good gardening gloves, be careful of spikes, thorns etc.
- Take care with pet scratches.
- Be careful not to get bitten by insects.

Sport

- Try to avoid violent exercise or violent movement of the arm/shoulder.
- Take gentle exercise.
- Swimming is recommended.

Diet

- Maintain a sensible weight for your height and build.
- Establish a balance diet which is low in fat and high in fibre.
- Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Drink plenty of fluid, especially water, fruit juices and herbal teas.
- There is no “lymphoedema” diet.
- Limit your salt intake

General

- Do not allow blood pressure to be taken in your “at risk” arm.
- No acupuncture in the affected side.
- No injections if possible on the affected side.
- No electrotherapy to induce heat to the body area.
- Keep the arm clean and skin supple using unperfumed creams or emollient like E45 or Eucerin.

Can anything be done?

Lymphoedema cannot be cured. Its effect can be controlled and the quality of life improved with a treatment programme consisting of:

Skin care—to keep the skin in good condition.

External compression/support—in the form of elastic hosiery or sleeve.

Simple exercise—of the affected limb, carried out while wearing your sleeve or stocking.

Simple self massage—to stimulate the lymphatic system.

Depending on the severity of the lymphoedema, treatment by way of Manual Lymphatic Drainage MLD (special massage technique) and Multi-layer Bandaging may be required.

Useful numbers and contacts

Lymphoedema Support Network (LSN)

St Luke's Crypt
Sidney Street
London
SW3 6NH
Tel: 020 7351 0990

British Lymphology Society (BLS)

Administrative Centre
24 Kiniths Crescent
West Bromwich
B71 4BX
Tel: 01452 790178

BACUP (British Association of Cancer United Patients)

3 Bath Place
Rivington Street
London
EC2A 3JR
Tel: 020 769 69003

Breast Cancer Care

5-13 Great Suffolk Street
London
SE1 0NS
Tel: 0345 092 0800

We are committed to providing high quality care. If you have a suggestion, comment or complaint about the care or services you have received, or if you need this leaflet in another format, please contact the Director of Clinical Services on 01977 781468.



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