

Head and Neck Lymphoedema

Information and Advice



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Lymphoedema is a condition which causes swelling anywhere in the body but is more commonly seen in arms and legs. This swelling is a collection of fluid within the tissues under the skin, which cannot be drained by a needle. This fluid, known as lymph is colourless and odourless but rich in protein. This high protein can cause dryness to the skin. There is no cure for lymphoedema but it can be managed. Lymphoedema occurs when the lymphatic system 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 surface of the skin which causes changes. The affected part can feel tight and firm. You may also notice your skin “hanging” under your chin.

Who is at risk?

Head and neck lymphoedema usually occurs when the lymphatic system is damaged, for example due to surgery or radiotherapy.

Damage to the lymphatic system alters normal lymphatic drainage and flow. The risk of lymphoedema does increase if you have had lymph nodes removed and you have had radiotherapy. It is also increased if you are overweight and/ or have repeated skin infections (cellulitis) or wound infections. Lymphoedema can occur at any time even many years after your surgery or radiotherapy.

Visit your doctor at once

- If you see any signs of inflammation
- If swelling becomes worse despite treatment
- Cellulitis can start as a rash or your skin becomes red, hot to touch and may be tender or painful. You may develop swelling further swelling and feel generally unwell or as if you have flu.

Do's and Don'ts

Cosmetic or beauty treatment

- Do:** Avoid cosmetics which irritate the skin.
- Do:** Shave with an electric razor
- Do:** Keep the skin clean and apply a non -scented moisturiser, for example E45 cream.
- Don't:** Have firm or kneading type massage.

Going outside

- Do:** Be careful not to get insect bites.
- Do:** Take care when sunbathing –avoid sunburn.

Diet

- Do:** Maintain a healthy weight for your height and build. (There is no “lymphoedema” diet)

Can anything be done?

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

- **Skincare** – keeping the skin in good condition can help to avoid infection/ cellulitis.
- **External compression/ support** – Do not wear when eating and drinking, sleeping or when in bed.
- **Simple exercise** – for example, head and neck stretching exercises, facial exercises, walking. Build up your activity gradually and rest when needed.
- **Simple self-massage** – to stimulate the lymphatic system. This can be done by hand or a makeup brush or baby brush can also be used.

Depending on the severity of the lymphoedema. Treatment by way of Manual Lymphatic Drainage MLD (a special technique) may be required.

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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