

Reducing the risk of lymphoedema after axillary lymph node surgery

This leaflet is for patients having under arm lymph node surgery for breast or skin cancer and explains how you can reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema immediately after surgery and long-term.

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a chronic swelling caused by the build-up of fluid. It can happen for many reasons. Symptoms can include swelling or feelings of fullness in the hand, arm, chest area or armpit on the side where the treatment has taken place.

Who is at risk of lymphoedema?

- Anyone who has surgery and / or radiotherapy to lymph nodes has a risk of developing lymphoedema.
- The majority of people will not develop lymphoedema. However, some people will, and most of these will only have mild symptoms that can be well-controlled. Lymphoedema is not dangerous and it won't affect any other treatments planned.
- The risk is higher for people having both surgery and radiotherapy to the lymph nodes under the arm. Those having only a few nodes removed for a sentinel node biopsy are at less risk than those that have greater numbers taken out.
- There is a chance of developing lymphoedema any time after cancer treatment, sometimes even years afterwards. The following should be considered lifelong advice, not just for the first few months after treatment.

What should I do if I think I have symptoms of lymphoedema?

Contact your clinical nurse specialist for advice. They can refer you to a lymphoedema specialist if necessary.

How can I reduce my risk of lymphoedema?

1. Keep active and use your arm normally.
2. Keep your skin in good condition to reduce your risk of cellulitis (infection in the skin and tissues).
3. Maintain a healthy body weight.

1. Keep active and use your arm normally

As muscles contract and relax they put gentle pressure on the lymphatic vessels encouraging fluid to drain away, so using your arm normally is a good way to reduce your risk of lymphoedema.

- Continue the exercises advised after surgery to regain / maintain good shoulder movement and to prevent scar tissue becoming tight.
- Ask your clinical nurse specialist for advice and referral to a physiotherapist if you are having difficulty regaining the movement in your shoulder or if you have pain / tightness.
- Try shoulder shrugging and circling, elbow bending / straightening, and clenching / unclenching your hand if you've been in one position for a while, and while walking long distances.
- If you gradually increase your fitness levels, you should be able to do more and still feel comfortable.
- Heavy and repetitive activities (carrying heavy shopping, gardening, heavy housework etc) can put more strain on your body after surgery, so gradually build up to these, and take it easy for the first few weeks.
- Good posture is important: try to avoid stooped positions or increased tension in your shoulder muscles. Think about your posture at your desk / when reading / using your upper body.
- Take plenty of rest breaks especially if you are doing activities involving repetitive movements; allow time to see how your body reacts.
- Take gentle regular exercise. Swimming or exercise in water, yoga and tai chi are examples of exercise that can be very helpful.
- Always do a warm up and cool down before and after exercise.
- If you are swimming or playing a sport for the first time since treatment, make sure you have adequate movement in your shoulder and begin with an easy session, increasing a little more next time if you feel comfortable to do so.
- Studies now show that gradually increasing movement and exercise reduces the risk of lymphoedema. This includes returning to / starting resistance training (e.g. using your own body weight / resistance bands / other equipment). Build up activity levels slowly, and take care to avoid sudden increases of vigorous exercise. Ensure you only exercise and take part in activities at your level of endurance.
- **Listen to your body!** If you notice increased aching, swelling or feelings of heaviness after an activity, reduce the duration or intensity or try a different form of movement.

2. Reduce the risk of cellulitis (infection in the skin and tissues)

Lymph nodes help the body fight infection. After they are removed, you are more at risk of cellulitis in your hand / arm / chest / armpit on the side you had treatment (your 'at risk area'). Cellulitis can sometimes trigger lymphoedema in this area or make lymphoedema worse, so do consider the following lifelong advice:

a) Take care of the skin in the 'at risk' area:

- Moisturise the area daily to keep the skin supple and well hydrated, and to reduce the risk of dry, flaky, irritated skin.
- Keep your skin clean. Wash and dry carefully, especially where there are any folds in the skin.
- Where possible, protect against damage to your skin:

- Use rubber gloves / gardening gloves / oven gloves when doing chores around the house and garden.
- Use a high factor sunscreen to avoid sunburn.
- Take care cutting your nails.
- Take care when removing under-arm hair: use an electric shaver, it is the gentlest method for your skin.
- Use an insect repellent to discourage insect bites.
- Treat every small cut or graze promptly by cleaning well and applying antiseptic.
- You may prefer to use your other arm to have injections / blood taken / intravenous fluids / blood pressure readings; there is not strong evidence to support this advice but expert opinion suggests it may be common sense to do so when you have the option (this does not apply in emergency situations).

b) Recognise the signs of cellulitis (infection) and get prompt treatment

- Signs of cellulitis may include: heat, redness or a rash in the “at risk” area. It may be painful and swollen; you may also feel unwell with flu-like symptoms.
- Seek medical help the same day from your GP/ NHS 111 if you feel unwell with the symptoms. Prompt treatment of cellulitis with antibiotics is essential and should be for a minimum of 14 days.

3. Maintain a healthy body weight

Studies have shown that keeping your weight within normal limits is very beneficial in reducing strain on your body, including the lymphatic system. Healthy eating and finding exercise that you enjoy and can do regularly will help; do seek advice if you need guidance on your diet and losing weight

Travel advice

- Take insect repellent, antiseptic and plasters away with you, and continue moisturising daily.
- On long journeys (car / train / plane) keep moving and do regular gentle exercises such as shrugging your shoulders, clenching / unclenching your fist.
- There is no evidence that flying short / long haul increases the risk of lymphoedema. Take common sense precautions including drinking lots of water and avoid tight clothing / jewellery on your at risk arm.

Vaccine advice

It is recommended that if you have had lymph nodes removed:

- From under one arm, the vaccine is given in the opposite arm.
- From under both arms, it is recommended that you have the vaccine in your thigh/buttocks: it may be appropriate to discuss this with the health care worker / GP before your appointment.

Further information

The Lymphoedema Support Network, Tel: 0207 351 4480 www.lymphoedema.org

Macmillan Cancer Support, Telephone: 0808 808 0000 www.macmillan.org.uk

References: (Accessed August 2023)

- <https://www.thebls.com/documents-library/lymph-facts-what-information-advice-and-support-should-be-provided-for-those-at-risk-of-lymphoedema>
- <https://www.thebls.com/documents-library/guidelines-on-the-management-of-cellulitis-in-lymphoedema>
- https://www.lymphoedema.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Consensus_Document_on_COVID_Vaccination_12feb2021.pdf

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Sue Ryder Lymphoedema Team, August 2023

Next review due: August 2025