



What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a condition characterised by a chronic swelling (oedema) which occurs when there is a build up of lymphatic fluid in the body's tissues. The condition usually affects the legs and or the arms but can also occur in other areas of the body.

Lymph is a normal colourless fluid that moves through the body via lymphatic vessels and through lymph nodes. The nodes filter and clean the lymph which helps protect our body against infection.

The lymphatic system pumps lymph around the body through bodily tissues and back through the bloodstream. The removal or radiation of lymph nodes which occurs in cancer treatment can cause a blockage in the lymphatic system. This may lead to a build up of lymph in the body's tissues and cause lymphoedema.

Without proper treatment this swelling may become worse and start to impact upon your day to day activities.

Not everyone who has had radiotherapy or had lymph nodes removed will develop lymphoedema. It is important to know how to prevent lymphoedema so that you can reduce your risk of developing the condition.

How can I reduce my risk of lymphoedema?

Skin Care

Your skin protects you against infection. Infections have been shown to cause or worsen lymphoedema so it is important to keep your skin healthy.

To keep your skin healthy:

- Avoid soap as this can dry out your skin. Use soap free or pH neutral alternatives such as QV, Dermaveen, Hamilton, Dove soap free body wash.
- Moisturise your skin daily with a non-perfumed moisturiser e.g. sorbolene. Apply moisturiser after your bath or shower to increase absorption.
- Dry carefully between your toes to help prevent tinea. Treat any tinea with an antifungal cream.
- Avoid sunburn by remaining covered in the sun and by wearing sunscreen.
- Avoid cuts, bruises, knocks and scratches to your skin. In particular;
 - avoid having injections, blood samples, blood pressure readings or intravenous drips on your 'at-risk' limb

- avoid insect bites by wearing alcohol free insect repellents
- take care with cutting your toenails or see a podiatrist
- avoid bare feet especially when outside and wear well fitting shoes
- use an electric razor or depilatory cream for removal of hair from your legs. Hand razors, epilators or wax may cause skin breaks or infections
- consider ways of protecting your skin, e.g. wear protective clothing or gloves while gardening; wear rubber gloves while washing the dishes
- clean any wounds immediately using an antiseptic.
- Avoid uneven pressure around your limbs e.g. crossing your legs; tight clothing or underwear, socks, knee high stocking; ill-fitting shoes; tight jewellery (watches or rings).

Keep active

Muscle movement increases the movement of lymph around the body and reduces the risk of fluid building up.

- Keep active and avoid sitting or standing for long periods of time.
- Start gradually with gentle exercise and work up to harder more challenging exercise.
- Check your 'at-risk' limb for any discomfort or swelling before and after exercising.

Avoid extra stress & strain

It is important to avoid putting extra stress or strain on your 'at-risk' limb, so where possible:

- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Don't overheat the 'at-risk' limb e.g. don't take hot baths or showers, or use saunas and spas.
- Avoid strenuous exercises if your body is not used to them e.g. lifting heavy weights.
- Don't exercise in hot weather.
- Avoid carrying heavy objects.
- Avoid heavy kneading massage.

Advice for travelling

Long distance travel (over 8 hours) by plane, car, bus or train may increase the risk of developing lymphoedema.

It is suggested that you:

- Regularly exercise the 'at risk' limb by taking breaks and walking around every few hours.
- Wear a travel compression garment while travelling on planes or other long trips. This can be purchased and fitted by a lymphoedema therapist or a supplier of compression garments. Contact the Lymphoedema Association of Victoria for details of lymphoedema therapists or compression garment stockists in your area.
- Minimise carrying of heavy luggage, buy luggage on wheels.
- Continue to care for your skin while on holidays. Pack in your soap free cleaner, moisturiser, sunscreen, insect repellent and antiseptic cream.

Signs and symptoms of lymphoedema

If you experience any of the symptoms below tell your doctor straight away.

- Discomfort, heaviness, tightness, fullness or swelling of the 'at-risk' limb.
- Burning, itchiness, numbness or pins and needles within the 'at-risk' limb.
- Temperature changes or redness of the skin.
- Marked indentations to the skin from, for example, socks, shoes, watch bands etc.

Please note: Immediately after surgery it is normal to experience swelling, numbness and discomfort. This is usually not lymphoedema and occurs as a result of recent trauma to your body and the body healing itself. If the swelling and discomfort does not improve then you should seek medical advice.

Treatment for lymphoedema

If you or your doctor suspects that you have lymphoedema it is important that you are referred to a lymphoedema clinic. Contact the Lymphoedema Association of Victoria for details of lymphoedema clinics or therapists in your area. The earlier lymphoedema is detected the easier it is to treat. Treatment usually involves skin care, manual techniques, exercises and wearing a compression garment.

Lymphoedema cannot be cured but it can improve and be well managed by seeking professional assistance.

For more information or concerns please contact:

Physiotherapy Department

Royal Women's Hospital
Level 1, Cnr Grattan St & Flemington Rd
Parkville Vic 3052
Tel: (03) 8345 3160
Monday to Friday 8.30am–5.00pm

Important contacts

Lymphoedema Association of Victoria

Tel: 1300 852 850
Web: www.lav.org.au

Cancer Council Victoria

Tel: 13 11 20 – Helpline
Web: www.cancervic.org.au

National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre

Tel: 02 9357 9400
Web: www.nbocc.org.au

Breast Cancer Network Australia

Tel: 1800 500 258
Web: www.bcna.org.au

Therapist Support Laboratory

Tel: 03 9417 5334
Web: www.tsaustralia.com.au