



Lymphoedema

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 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 and strain

- 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 supplier of compression garments. Contact the Lymphoedema Association of Australia 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 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 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 Australia 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 and advice

Physiotherapy Department

Royal Women's Hospital
Level 1, Cnr Grattan St & Flemington Rd
Parkville Vic 3052
T: (03) 8345 3160
Monday to Friday 8.30am-5.00pm

Important contacts

Lymphoedema Association of Australia

T: 1300 852 850
W: lymphaustralia.org.au

Cancer Council Victoria

T: 13 11 20 - Helpline
W: cancervic.org.au

Cancer Australia

W: canceraustralia.gov.au

Breast Cancer Network Australia

T: 1800 500 258
W: bcna.org.au

Therapist Support Laboratory

T: 03 9417 5334
W: tslaustralia.com.au

Family Violence Support

1800 Respect National Helpline

You can get help if you have experienced sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.

You can call any time of day or night.

1800 737 732
1800respect.org.au

Do you need an interpreter?



You can ask for an interpreter if you need one.