

Reducing your Risk of Arm and Leg Lymphoedema

If you have had surgery or radiotherapy to your breast or groin area as part of your cancer treatment, you may be at risk of lymphoedema. This factsheet describes what lymphoedema is and how you can reduce your risk of getting it. If you have any questions or concerns, talk to your doctor or call our **Cancer Nurseline** on Freephone **1800 200 700**. You can also visit **www.cancer.ie**

What is lymphoedema?

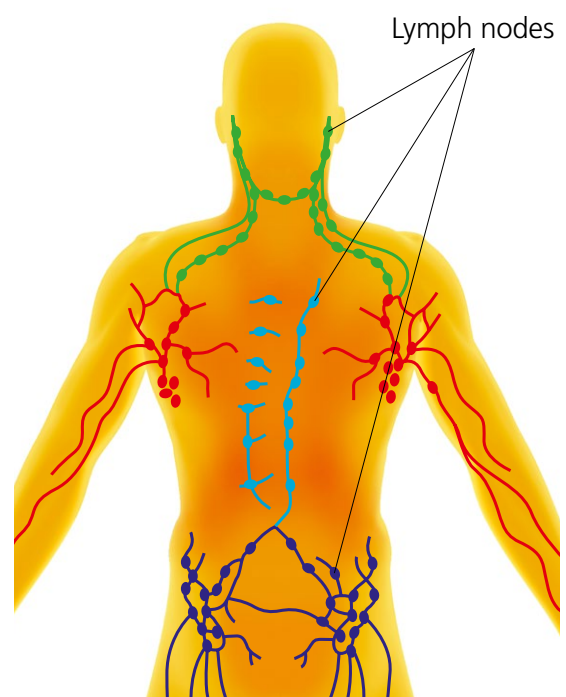
Lymphoedema is pronounced lim-fo-dee-ma. It is a long-term (chronic) swelling caused by a build-up of fluid in the body's tissues.

Lymphoedema can develop after cancer if:

- you have surgery to remove the lymph nodes
- you have radiotherapy to the lymph nodes
- the cancer blocks a lymph node or some lymph vessels.

Lymphoedema can develop months or many years after cancer treatment. The most common places for lymphoedema to occur after cancer treatment are:

- in the arm and breast area after breast cancer treatment
- in the leg after cancer treatment to the groin area or the pelvis.



The lymphatic system

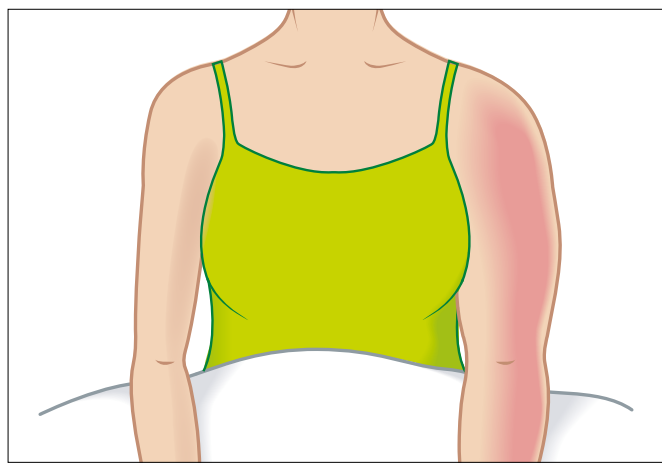
Cancer Nurseline **1800 200 700**

Who is at risk?

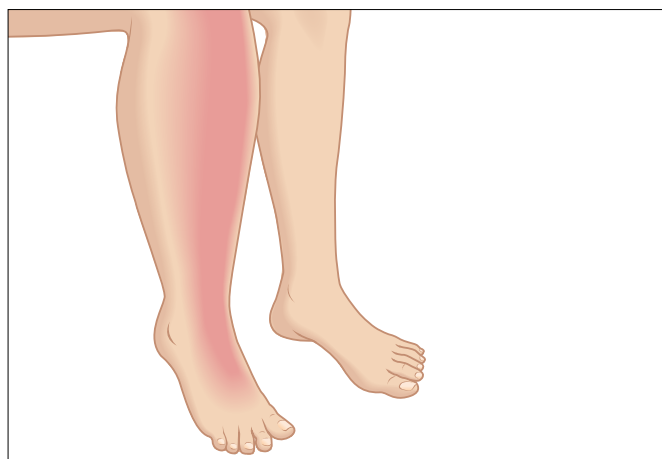
You are at risk of developing arm lymphoedema if you have had surgery or radiotherapy to your breast tissue and surrounding area, including your armpit.

You are at risk of developing leg lymphoedema if you have had surgery or radiotherapy to your leg or groin and surrounding area. This usually happens after surgery or radiotherapy to the lymph nodes in the groin for prostate cancer, gynecological cancers (cancer of the womb, cervix, ovary or vulva), or a type of skin cancer called melanoma.

Your risk of lymphoedema is higher if you have surgery and radiotherapy together in the same area.



Arm lymphoedema



Leg lymphoedema

Apart from the arm and the leg, where else can lymphoedema occur?

Lymphoedema is most common in the arm and the leg but it can also occur:

- in the breast or chest after breast cancer treatment
- in the pelvic area and genitals. This sometimes happens after surgery or radiotherapy to lymph nodes in the pelvis for cancer of the prostate, bladder, womb, vagina, testis, penis or rectum
- in the neck and face, if lymph nodes in the neck are affected, but this is rare.

What are the signs and symptoms to look out for?

- With arm lymphoedema, you may notice swelling in your arms, hand, fingers or breast.
- With leg lymphoedema, you may notice swelling in your leg, foot, toes, lower tummy, buttocks or genital area.
- The swelling may be less in the morning and increase as the day goes on. This swelling may be soft or hard depending on how long you have had it.

Other possible signs include:

- A feeling of tightness when wearing clothing, shoes, bracelets, watches, or rings.
- A full, heavy, achy or weak feeling in the arm or leg
- A tight feeling in the skin. Skin may also be dry, flaky, rough or scaly
- Changes to your skin colour
- Trouble moving your arm or leg

What should I do to reduce my risk of lymphoedema?

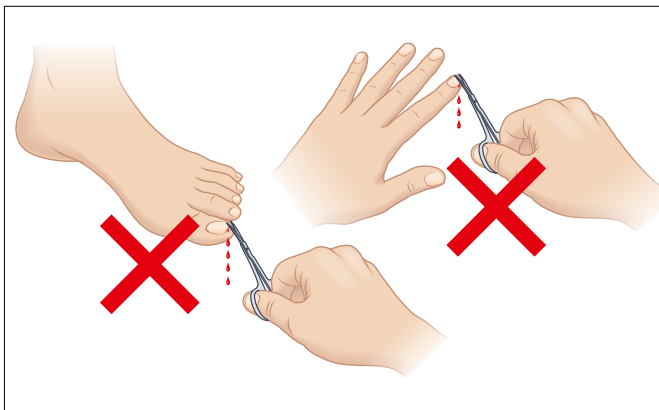
The following advice will help you to reduce your risk of lymphoedema:

Take care of your skin

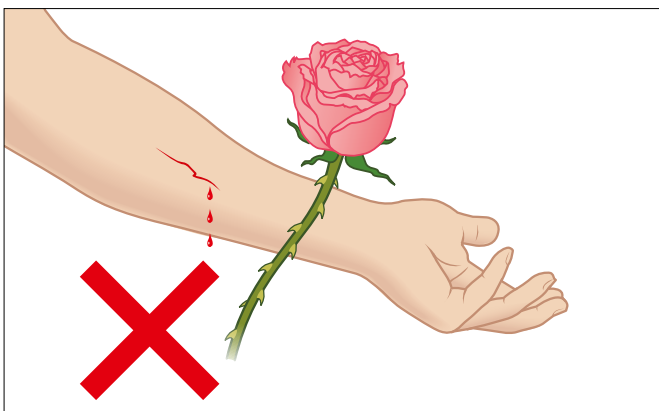
Taking care of your skin on the affected limb to reduce the risk of infection is essential in the

prevention and management of lymphoedema. Part of the lymphatic system is a fine network of vessels running just below the skin. These vessels help to remove any extra fluid and waste substances from the body's tissues. It is therefore essential to look after the skin to prevent it becoming dry, cracked or broken. Damaged skin can lead to an infection called cellulitis, which can increase the risk of developing lymphoedema.

- Cleanse and moisturise your skin daily with unscented soap and cream using gentle **upward** strokes.
- Protect yourself against excessive heat, which can increase swelling. Avoid hot baths or showers, saunas and extreme temperatures.
- Use nail clippers or emery boards rather than scissors. Do not cut your cuticles.
- Use electric razors instead of normal razors or hair-removal creams.



Use nail clippers or emery boards rather than scissors.



Try to avoid cuts and scratches. Monitor any cut, no matter how small.

Preventing infection

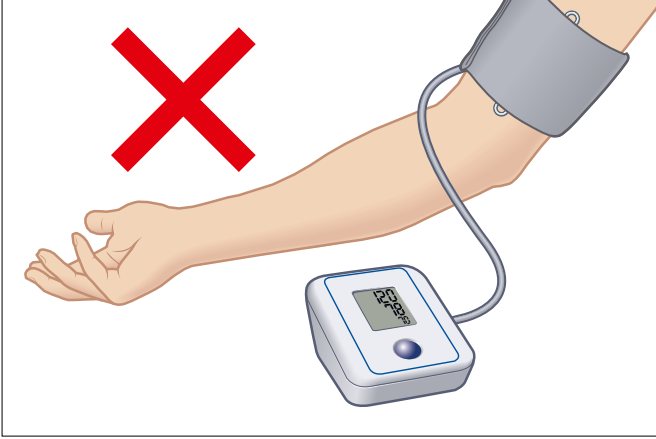
Hints & tips

- Try to avoid cuts, scratches, burns and insect bites and use antiseptic and antifungal creams when necessary. Monitor any cut, no matter how small – even a rag nail.
- Try to avoid walking around barefoot as you may damage the skin on your foot.
- Wear gloves for gardening and housework.
- Contact your doctor immediately if you notice that your skin has become red, hot and tender, as you may have an infection. This infection is often referred to as cellulitis and it is important to get this treated quickly with antibiotics.

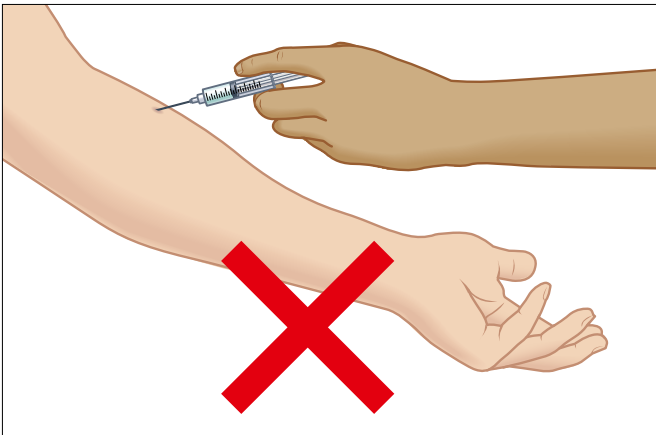
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Avoid trauma to your limb

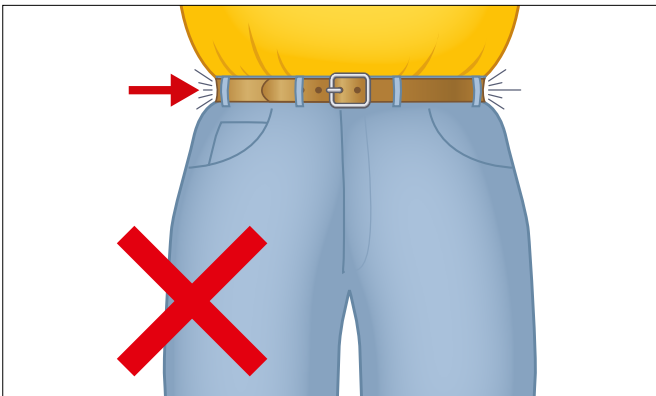
- If possible, never allow injections, blood-taking or blood-pressure cuffs on the at-risk arm.
- Avoid tight, restrictive clothing, such as tight bra straps and watches, tight belts and tight underwear.



If possible, never allow blood-pressure cuffs on the at-risk arm.



If possible, never allow injections on the at-risk arm.



Avoid tight, restrictive clothing and jewellery.

Exercise regularly

Gentle rhythmic exercises will help to pump your muscles and remove the build-up of lymph.

To reduce your risk of **arm lymphoedema**, try gentle repetitions of the following exercises:

- Slow 'boxing', 'rowing' or 'breast-stroke' type movements.
- Slowly bend and straighten your elbow and wrist.
- Make a fist and then straighten your fingers.

To reduce your risk of **leg lymphoedema**, try the following:

- Tighten your buttocks, hold for 5 seconds, then relax. Tighten thigh muscles, hold for 5 seconds, then relax.
- Bend and straighten your knees, one at a time.
- Move your foot up and down at the ankle. Circle your foot to the left and the right.

Get support

Hints & tips

If you need support there are lots of people to help you.

Call our Cancer Nurseline on Freephone **1800 200 700** or visit a Daffodil Centre to:

- Speak to a cancer nurse in confidence
- Ask for free copies of our booklets about how to cope
- Find out how to make contact with a cancer support centre
- Ask about one-to-one support from someone who has been through a cancer diagnosis

You can also email the nurses: cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie or join our online community at: www.cancer.ie/community

Physical activity

Hints & tips

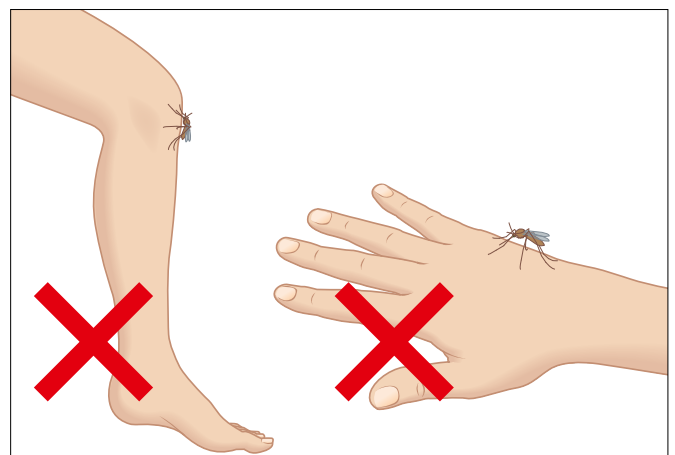
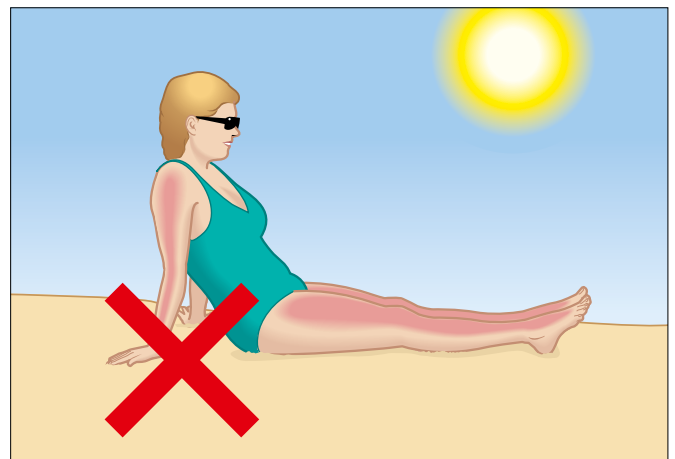
- Try to use the at-risk limb normally – using the muscles will help to improve lymphatic circulation.
- It is very important to keep your weight within normal limits, as excess weight can increase strain on the lymphatic system.
- Exercise is important, but remember to gradually build up your level of activity over time. In most cases you will be able to continue with the exercises and activities you enjoyed before your cancer treatment.
- Always do a 'warm up' and 'cool down' before and after exercise. Ask your physiotherapist for advice.
- If you are at risk of arm lymphoedema, avoid over-exertion of the at-risk arm. For example, avoid lifting or carrying heavy objects.
- If you are at risk of leg lymphoedema, avoid long periods of standing in one position.



Physical activity is very important to reduce your risk of lymphoedema.

Take care when travelling

- Flying with long periods of inactivity can affect circulation and lymph movement.
- It may even trigger lymphoedema in people at risk of developing it.
- Stretch and move around as much as possible when travelling.
- There is no evidence to suggest that wearing a compression garment when flying reduces the risk of developing lymphoedema. An inappropriate garment may cause more problems.
- Avoid sunburn and insect bites.
- Prevent dehydration by frequently drinking water.



Skincare is very important so avoid sunburn and insect bites.

What treatment can I get if I begin to develop lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema cannot be cured but the swelling can often be kept to a minimum, particularly when it is diagnosed early. Early treatment is always recommended, when the swelling is soft and easily managed.

The treatment aims to restore limb size and function, and reduce swelling caused by the build-up of lymph.

If you have unexplained swelling following treatment for cancer, you should tell your GP, nurse specialist or hospital doctor. Ask to be referred to a specialist lymphoedema therapist.

Treatment varies from person to person – from education, exercises and skin care advice for patients with mild lymphoedema to more intensive treatment for more severe cases.

More severe cases may require two phases of treatment:

1. An intensive phase of therapy, during which you may receive daily treatment by a lymphoedema therapists for up to six weeks. Treatment usually involves massage, skin care, bandaging and wearing a specially measured compression garment.
2. The maintenance phase, where the person continues treatment at home.

Early treatment is always recommended, when the swelling is soft and easily managed.

With proper education and care the swelling can be reduced and lymphoedema can be kept well under control.

How can I cope better with lymphoedema?

With proper education and care lymphoedema can be kept under control and the swelling can be reduced. Lymphoedema is a condition that never goes away, that is why it is important to be involved in your lymphoedema care.

Keeping up with all the precautions and treatment plans can be demanding, but taking care of yourself and following your doctor or therapist's advice can help to keep lymphoedema under control.

Here are some tips to help you to cope better:

- Find out as much as possible about lymphoedema – you might like to look at the links on the back page of this factsheet.
- Ask questions about your condition.
- Try to be realistic in the goals you set for yourself.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Talk to others who may be going through a similar experience – a support group like Lymphoedema Ireland can help. (See the back page of this factsheet for contact details.)
- Try to remain positive



Your own notes

A large, empty, light blue rounded rectangular area intended for taking notes.

Useful organisations and websites

Lymphoedema Ireland

(Support, information and other resources for people with lymphoedema living in Ireland)

Helpline: 087 693 4964

Web: www.lymphireland.com

Lymphoedema Network Northern Ireland (LNNI)

(Northern Ireland-based lymphoedema support and information)

Web: www.lnni.org

The Lymphoedema Support Network

(UK-based education and support service for people with lymphoedema)

Web: www.lymphoedema.org

Manual Lymph Drainage Ireland

(The professional organisation of healthcare practitioners who provide treatment in the management of lymphoedema)

Website: www.mldireland.com

Plurabelle Paddlers

(A dragon boat team for women who have had breast cancer)

Website: www.plurabellepaddlers.com

International Lymphoedema Framework

(A dedicated platform for the lymphoedema community)

Website: www.lympho.org

Daffodil Centres

The Irish Cancer Society's Daffodil Centres are located in thirteen hospitals nationwide.

The centers are staffed by cancer nurses and trained volunteers who provide confidential advice, support and information to anyone affected by cancer. For details of your nearest Daffodil Centre, call the Cancer Nurseline on **1800 200 700** or visit www.cancer.ie



For more information on arm lymphoedema or for confidential advice from our cancer nurse specialists, call the **National Cancer Helpline** on **Freefone**

1800 200 700

(Monday–Thursday, 9am–6pm, Friday 9am–5pm) or email cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie



MEMBER

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