Reducing your risk of arm lymphoedema after cancer treatment

The information in this factsheet will help you to understand more about arm lymphoedema. We hope it answers some of your questions about this symptom, what causes it, what are the signs and how to reduce your risk of getting it. If you have any other questions or concerns, talk to your doctor or call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700.
Have you had recent surgery or radiotherapy after a diagnosis of cancer?

If yes, this factsheet contains important information as you may be at risk of developing lymphoedema. The following advice will help you:

• to understand the condition
• to reduce your risk of developing lymphoedema
• to recognise the early signs of lymphoedema.

Who is at risk?

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

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a swelling that occurs as a result of an impaired lymphatic system. The lymphatic system is part of the body’s immune system and carries a fluid called lymph. This system works together with the blood system to transport the lymph fluid and remove waste products.

If the system is disrupted, which can happen if lymph nodes are removed during surgery to treat cancer, then the lymph can build up to cause swelling.

Lymphoedema can occur within a few months, a couple of years, or 20 years or more after cancer treatment.

What are the signs and symptoms to look out for?

You may notice swelling in your arms, hand, fingers or breast.

Your arm may feel heavy and you may experience difficulty in carrying out simple everyday tasks. 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 it has been present. You may find it difficult to get clothes to fit.
What should I do to reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema cannot be totally cured but it can be controlled by following a treatment programme. This aims to restore limb size and function and decrease heaviness.

The following advice should be followed every day to reduce the risk of lymphoedema developing:

1. Skincare

Skincare is essential in the prevention and management of lymphoedema. By caring for your skin, it reduces your risk of infection. Part of the lymphatic system is a fine network of vessels running just below your skin. These vessels help to remove any extra fluid and waste substances from your body's tissues. It is therefore essential to look after your 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.

a. Look after your skin:

- Cleanse and moisturise your arms daily with unscented soap and cream using gentle upward strokes.
- Protect yourself against excessive heat, which can increase swelling, by avoiding hot baths/showers, saunas and extreme temperatures.
- Use nail clippers or emery boards rather than scissors.
- Use electric razors instead of normal razors or hair removal creams.

b. Aim to prevent infection:

- Try to avoid cuts, scratches, burns, insect bites and use antiseptic and antifungal creams when necessary. Monitor any cut no matter how small, even a rag nail.

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.
c. Avoid trauma to arm where possible:

- If possible, never allow injections, blood taking or blood pressure cuffs on the operated arm.

Avoid tight, restrictive clothing. For example, tight bra straps, watches, etc.

2. Complete the following exercises regularly

Gentle rhythmic exercises will help to pump your muscles and remove the build-up of lymph in the arm. For example, gentle repetitions of the following exercises:

- Slow ‘boxing’, ‘rowing’ or ‘breast stroke’ type movements.
- Slow bending and straightening of your elbow and wrist.
- Make a fist and then straighten your fingers.

3. Holidays and travel

- 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 and an inappropriate garment may cause more problems.
- Skincare is very important on holidays so avoid sunburn and insect bites.
- Prevent dehydration by frequently drinking water.
4. General recommendations

- Try to use the at-risk arm normally as using the muscles will help to improve lymphatic circulation.
- 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.
- Avoid over-exertion of the at-risk arm. For example, lifting or carrying heavy objects.
- It is very important to keep a healthy weight as excess weight can increase strain on the lymphatic system.

What should I do if I notice swelling?

If you notice swelling anywhere on your arm, hand or breast area (even if it comes and goes) tell your GP or current healthcare provider and ask to be referred to a trained lymphoedema therapist.

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

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

Your doctor will refer you to a trained specialist for assessment and treatment. The therapist may suggest a programme of complex decongestive therapy (CDT) which consists of gentle massage (manual lymphatic drainage, MLD), multi-layer bandaging, skincare and exercises. Skills will be taught to help you to manage the long-term condition yourself.

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

Useful organisations

Reach to Recovery
Provides practical and emotional support to women with breast cancer.
43/45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4
National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700

Citizens Information
Ground Floor, George’s Quay House
43 Townsend Street, Dublin 2
Email: information@citizensinformation.ie
Website: www.citizensinformation.ie

Health Service Executive (HSE)
Tel: 1850 24 1850 (Mon-Sat, 8am-8pm)

Irish Patients’ Association
Unit 1, 21 Church Road Ballybrack, Co Dublin
Tel: 01 272 2552
Out-of-hours emergency: 087 652 9448
Email: info@irishpatients.ie
Website: www.irishpatients.ie

helpline@irishcancer.ie
Useful websites

Lymphoedema Ireland
www.lymphireland.com

Manual Lymph Drainage Ireland
www.mldireland.com

Lymphoedema Network Northern Ireland (LNNI)
www.lnni.org

The Lymphoedema Support Network (LSN)
www.lymphoedema.org/lsn

Plurabelle Paddlers
www.plurabellepaddlers.com

FURTHER INFORMATION
For more information about lymphoedema or for confidential advice from our cancer nurse specialists, call the National Cancer Helpline on freephone 1800 200 700

1800 200 700
(Monday–Thursday, 9am–7pm; Friday, 9am–5pm)
or email helpline@irishcancer.ie

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Tel: (01) 231 0500
Fax: (01) 231 0555
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie
Website: www.cancer.ie

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