Reducing your Risk of Leg Lymphoedema

If you have had surgery or radiotherapy to your leg or groin area as part of your cancer treatment you may be at risk of leg lymphoedema. This factsheet explains what lymphoedema is and how to reduce your risk. For more information call the National Cancer Helpline on 1800 200 700 or visit www.cancer.ie.

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 and cause swelling. Lymphoedema can occur within a few months, a couple of years, or 20 years or more after cancer therapy.

Who is at risk?
You are at risk of developing leg lymphoedema if you have had surgery or radiotherapy to your leg or groin and surrounding area.
What are the signs/symptoms to look out for?

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 it has been present. Your leg may feel heavy and you may experience difficulty in carrying out simple everyday tasks. You may find it difficult to get clothes to fit.

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

What should I do to reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema?

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

The advice below should be followed every day - with particular attention to the leg on the same side as the site of cancer - to reduce the risk of lymphoedema developing:

- **Take care of your skin**

  Skincare to maintain good skin quality and 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 legs 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.

- **Exercise regularly**

  Gentle rhythmic exercises will help to pump the muscles and remove the build-up of lymph in the leg:

  - 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.

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Preventing 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.
- Try to avoid walking around barefoot as you may damage the skin on your foot.
- 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.
• 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 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.

Reducing your risk

As well as good skincare, exercise and taking extra care when travelling, the following tips can help to prevent lymphoedema developing:

• Try to use the at-risk leg normally - using the muscles will help to improve lymphatic circulation.
• Avoid prolonged periods of standing in one position.
• It is very important to keep your weight within normal limits, as excess weight can increase strain on the lymphatic system.
• Avoid tight, restrictive clothing, e.g. tight elastic on socks, waistbands or regular wearing of low-fronted shoes, etc.

What should I do if I notice swelling?
If you notice swelling anywhere on your leg or foot, even if it comes and goes, you should tell your GP or current healthcare provider and ask to be referred to a specialist 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 and websites

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

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

Lymphoedema Ireland
www.lymphireland.com

Manual Lymph Drainage Ireland
www.mldireland.com

Irish Patients Association
www.irishpatients.ie

For more information on leg lymphoedema or for confidential advice from our cancer nurse specialists, call the National Cancer Helpline on Freephone 1800 200 700

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

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