

Reducing your Risk of Arm Lymphoedema

If you have had surgery or radiotherapy to your breast tissue and surrounding area as part of your cancer treatment you may be at risk of arm 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**.

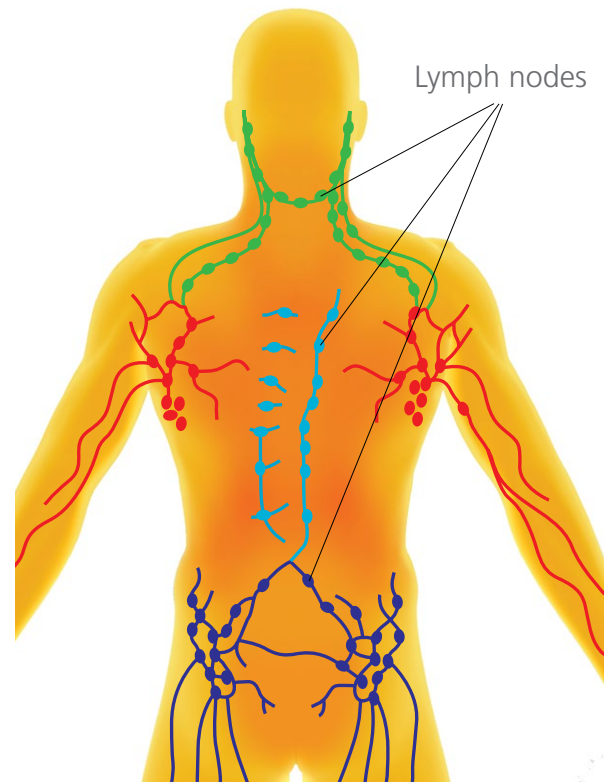
What is lymphoedema?

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 arm lymphoedema if you have had surgery or radiotherapy to your breast tissue and surrounding area, including your armpit.



National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700

What are the signs/symptoms to look out for?

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

To reduce the risk of lymphoedema developing, the advice below should be followed every day – with particular attention to the arm on the same side as the site of cancer:

- **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 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.

Preventing infection



- 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.
- 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.

- **Avoid trauma to your arm**

- 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, watches, etc.

- **Exercise regularly**

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

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

• 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

Hints & tips

- Try to use the at-risk arm 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.
- Avoid over-exertion of the at-risk arm; for example, avoid lifting or carrying heavy objects.

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

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, 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

Survivors Supporting Survivors

Provides practical and emotional support to women with cancer. For details call National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700
Website: www.cancer.ie

Lymphoedema Ireland

Helpline: 087 693 4964
Website: www.lymphireland.com

Lymphoedema Network Northern Ireland (LNNI)

Website: www.lnni.org

The Lymphoedema Support Network (LSN)

Website: www.lymphoedema.org/lsn

Manual Lymph Drainage Ireland

Website: www.mldireland.com

Irish Patients Association

Website: www.irishpatients.ie

Plurabelle Paddlers

Website: www.plurabellepaddlers.com

Daffodil Centres

The Irish Cancer Society's Daffodil Centres provide cancer information, support and advice in local hospitals. Daffodil Centres aim to provide a wide range of information locally to anyone affected by or concerned about cancer.

For details of your nearest Daffodil Centre call the National Cancer Helpline 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 Freephone**

1800 200 700

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



MEMBER

Irish Cancer Society
43/45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4

T: 01 231 0500
F: 01 231 0555
E: helpline@irishcancer.ie
W: www.cancer.ie



Published by the Irish Cancer Society.
© Irish Cancer Society, 2009. Revised: 2011, 2014.
Next revision 2016.

The Irish Cancer Society wishes to thank Lymphoedema Network Northern Ireland (LNNI) for permission to reproduce the text of their factsheets on lymphoedema. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Irish Cancer Society.