

WHAT IS LYMPHOEDEMA?



Your lymphatic system, acts as part of your body's plumbing and is a network of vessels (tubes) and nodes (glands) that drains fluid away from tissues and back into your blood stream. Your lymph vessels collect fluid (water, protein and waste material) from body tissues and transport it back into your blood stream. Your lymph nodes clean this fluid to help fight off infection. This acts as part of your body's plumbing system.

Lymphoedema is a build-up of fluid (swelling), which happens when your body's plumbing system doesn't work properly. This swelling can affect any part of your body depending on where the problem is. If left untreated, there is a risk that it may worsen over time. Whilst the reason for lymphoedema cannot be cured, the symptoms can be effectively managed and very often improved.

What causes Lymphoedema?

There are a variety of reasons as to why you have Lymphoedema, including:

- Surgical removal of lymph nodes
- Radiotherapy damage
- Cancer cells blocking your vessels or nodes
- Scarring and damage to your lymphatics from repeated infections (cellulitis)
- Some people are born with an incomplete lymphatic system

Everyone who lives with lymphoedema is different, so we will advise you on which treatment is best for you.

You may notice that your swelling is minimal in the morning, but worsens as the day progresses. Although this intermittent swelling may not cause too much concern, if left untreated the swelling may worsen and become hard and solid.

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There are four, equally important elements to manage the swelling:

Skin care

It's important to keep your skin in good condition to reduce the risk of infection (cellulitis). This involves cleaning and moisturising your skin on a daily basis and taking good care of your nails and cuticles.

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Exercise

It is important to stay as active as possible when you have Lymphoedema. Your muscles act like a pump to encourage drainage of fluid. It also helps to keep joints mobile to prevent stiffness.

As everyone has a different level of fitness and ability, it is important to find the right balance of exercise that suits you. Swimming, tai chi and yoga are helpful activities for dealing with Lymphoedema. Any new or return to exercise should be built up gradually to avoid injury and strain.

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Compression / Support Garment

This helps to reduce the swelling and prevents a further build-up of fluid. If a garment is advised this will be part of your assessment.

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Lymphatic drainage

This is a gentle massage technique to help move fluid, which is something the clinician will teach you how to do yourself known as Simple Lymphatic Drainage (SLD).