

Reducing the risk of lymphoedema after groin or pelvic lymph node surgery

This leaflet is for patients having surgery to remove lymph nodes in their groin or pelvis and explains how you can reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema immediately after surgery and long-term.

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a chronic swelling caused by the build-up of fluid. It can happen for many reasons. Symptoms can include swelling or feelings of fullness in the foot and/or leg and/or pelvis on the side where the treatment has taken place, and sometimes the genital area.

Who is at risk of lymphoedema?

- Anyone who has surgery and/or radiotherapy to lymph nodes has a risk of developing it.
- The majority of people will not develop lymphoedema. However, some people will, and most of these will only have mild symptoms that can be well controlled. Lymphoedema is not dangerous and it won't usually affect any other planned treatments.
- The risk is higher for people having both surgery and radiotherapy to the lymph nodes. Those having only a few nodes removed for a [sentinel lymph node biopsy](#) are at less risk than those that have greater numbers taken out.
- There are other factors that can increase your risk of developing lymphoedema after surgery/radiotherapy. These include being less mobile, being overweight, having varicose veins, leg ulcers or longstanding skin disorders. If you have had deep vein thrombosis (DVT) or surgery on your veins, recurrent infections in your leg or have a family history of leg swelling, you will also be at increased risk.
- There is a chance of developing lymphoedema any time after cancer treatment; sometimes even years afterwards. The following advice should be considered lifelong, not just for the first few months after treatment.

How can I reduce my risk of lymphoedema?

1. Keep active.
2. Keep your skin in good condition to reduce the risk of cellulitis (skin and tissue infection).
3. Maintain a healthy body weight.

1. Keep active

- As muscles contract and relax, they put gentle pressure on the lymphatic vessels encouraging fluid to drain away, so keeping active is a good way to reduce your risk of lymphoedema. Exercise will also help you maintain a healthy weight and keep you fit. Start gently, do what you feel comfortable with and gradually build up your fitness levels.

- Continue the exercises advised after surgery to regain/maintain good hip movement and to prevent scar tissue becoming tight.
- Ask your clinical nurse specialist for advice; a referral to a physiotherapist may help if you are having difficulty regaining the movement or if you have pain or tightness.
- Try simple, regular movements little and often throughout the day, such as pumping your foot up and down at your ankle, bending and straightening your knee, marching on the spot, clenching and relaxing your buttock muscles.
- Alter your position regularly, as being in one position for a long time will not encourage much movement of fluid. Try to avoid standing still for long periods of time; if you are in a situation where you have to stand, keep your leg muscles working, e.g. by shifting your weight from foot to foot or from your heels to your toes.
- Take regular gentle exercise. Walking (especially Nordic walking) is a great way to get fit. Build up slowly if you're not used to walking far. Other examples of activities that can be beneficial are swimming or water-based exercise, yoga, pilates, and tai chi, cycling and light aerobics.
- Take plenty of rest breaks, especially if you are doing activities involving repetitive movements; allow time to see how your body reacts.
- Always do a warm up and cool down before and after exercise.
- Studies now show that gradually increasing movement and exercise reduces the risk of lymphoedema. This includes returning to or starting resistance training (e.g. using your own body weight or resistance bands or other equipment). Build up activity levels slowly and take care to avoid sudden increases of vigorous exercise. Ensure you only exercise and take part in activities at your level of endurance.
- Sitting with your legs down for long periods may increase the likelihood of swelling in your lower legs. Try sitting with your feet and knees resting comfortably on a stool so your feet are level with your hips; you may need to put a cushion or pillow on the stool so your calves and knees are fully supported.
- **Listen to your body!** If you notice increased aching, swelling or feelings of heaviness after an activity, reduce the duration or intensity or try a different form of movement.

2. Reduce the risk of cellulitis (an infection in the skin and tissues)

Lymph nodes help the body fight infection. After they are removed, you are more at risk of cellulitis in your foot/leg/groin/pelvis/genital area on the side you had treatment (your 'at risk areas'). Cellulitis can sometimes trigger lymphoedema in this area or make lymphoedema worse, so do consider the following lifelong advice:

a) Take care of the skin in the 'at risk' areas.

Cellulitis can be caused by bacteria entering the skin in a number of ways. This could be via a break in the skin (such as a blister, cut, insect bite, area of dry, flaky skin), through a pre-existing wound or ulcer, or via an area of inflammation (such as athlete's foot, fungal nail infection or eczema). Signs of infection can also sometimes occur with no apparent cause. To reduce the risk of cellulitis, keep your skin supple and well moisturised and, where possible, protect against damage to your skin:

- Moisturise the affected leg daily. It is important to stroke downwards for the last few strokes when applying moisturiser, to avoid it getting trapped under the hair follicles.
- Keep your skin clean. Wash and dry carefully, especially between your toes.

- Wear well-fitting shoes and socks to reduce the risk of blisters and wear protective beach shoes if you go to a pool or beach rather than going barefoot.
 - Use a high factor sunscreen to avoid sunburn.
 - Take care cutting your nails. See a podiatrist if you have any corns/calluses/issues with your toenails/feet and seek advice for managing nail and fungal infections.
 - If you shave your legs, an electric shaver is the gentlest method to use. Using a bladed razor can risk cuts that might allow infection to enter your leg.
 - Use an insect repellent to discourage insect bites.
 - Treat every small cut or graze promptly by cleaning well and applying antiseptic.
- b) Recognise the signs of cellulitis (infection) and get prompt treatment**
- Signs of cellulitis may include: heat, redness or a rash in an “at risk” area. It may be painful and swollen; you may also feel unwell with flu-like symptoms.
 - Seek medical help the same day from your GP or NHS 111 and tell them you have had lymph node surgery; prompt treatment of cellulitis with antibiotics is essential and should be for a minimum of 14 days. If you have signs of cellulitis and feel very unwell, go to the nearest Emergency Department (A&E).

3. Maintain a healthy body weight

Studies have shown that keeping your weight within normal limits for your height is very beneficial in reducing strain on your body, including the lymphatic system. Healthy eating and finding exercise that you enjoy and can do regularly, will help. To calculate your BMI to see if you are a healthy weight, visit <https://www.nhs.uk/health-assessment-tools/calculate-your-body-mass-index/>

Seek advice from your GP if you need guidance on your diet and losing weight.

Clothing advice

Wear comfortable clothing and avoid anything that is restrictive, such as tight elastic in underwear, waistbands or at the top of socks; this could restrict how the lymph nodes drain.

Travel advice

- Take insect repellent, antiseptic and plasters away with you, and continue moisturising daily.
- On long journeys (car/train/plane), keep moving and do regular gentle exercises such as pumping your feet up and down at your ankles, marching on the spot, clenching and relaxing your buttock muscles.
- There is no evidence that flying short/long haul increases the risk of lymphoedema. Take common sense precautions including drinking lots of water and avoid tight clothing/socks/shoes.

What should I do if I think I have symptoms of lymphoedema?

Contact your clinical nurse specialist for advice. They can refer you to a lymphoedema specialist if necessary.

Further information

The Lymphoedema Support Network, Tel: 0207 351 4480 <https://www.lymphoedema.org>
Macmillan Cancer Support, Telephone: 0808 808 0000 www.macmillan.org.uk

References: (Accessed August 2023)

- <https://www.thebls.com/documents-library/lymph-facts-what-information-advice-and-support-should-be-provided-for-those-at-risk-of-lymphoedema>
- <https://www.thebls.com/documents-library/guidelines-on-the-management-of-cellulitis-in-lymphoedema>
- [Reducing the risk of lower limb lymphoedema 12-22.pdf](https://www.lymphoedema.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Reducing_the_risk_of_lower_limb_lymphoedema_12-22.pdf)
[https://www.lymphoedema.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Reducing the risk of lower limb lymphoedema 12-22.pdf](https://www.lymphoedema.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Reducing_the_risk_of_lower_limb_lymphoedema_12-22.pdf)

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