



Lymphoedema Department

Lymphoedema and Exercise

This leaflet explains the reasons and importance of exercise and movement in the long-term management of lymphoedema. It provides useful information and tips on how you can help yourself on a daily basis to manage your condition.

Why is exercise important?

Regular exercise will help you to control your swelling and help you to feel better in yourself. It can also reduce stress and anxiety. It may help to reduce any discomfort and pain due to joint stiffness and lack of movement, and enable your joints to stay flexible.

What happens when you exercise?

Keeping physically active has many benefits. When the muscles move, they produce a pumping action on the blood and lymph vessels, helping them to send fluid away from the tissues and back into the general system for processing and removal. As breathing becomes heavier, the chest movements stimulate fluid flow through the veins and lymph vessels.

How does exercise help you?

Exercise is an important part of lymphoedema management. It can improve lymphoedema because it:

- Increases the flow of lymph fluid by using your muscles
- Helps lymph fluid move away from the swollen area
- Strengthens your muscles
- Helps to keep the joints flexible, and can maintain or improve the range of movement
- Can improve your posture

Other benefits of exercise

A gradual and steady increase in regular exercise can help all of the body systems to be more efficient. It:

- Helps to maintain or reduce your weight (being overweight can contribute to lymphoedema)
- Can reduce joint stiffness and improve flexibility
- Improves the way the tissues heal and repair
- Improves your circulation
- Keeps your bones strong, reducing the risk of osteoporosis
- Helps to move and work your limbs for everyday tasks

Exercise and Lymphoedema

The exercise you do may depend on your age, motivation and level of fitness. It could be gentle stretches/exercises, or something that you enjoy or have enjoyed before. The most important thing is to do it regularly. If you have not done any exercise for a while, or plan to take up a new activity, it is best to start slowly and gently, and progress gradually to avoid straining yourself. Too much strenuous activity, particularly if you start suddenly, may cause your swelling to increase. Progressing slowly also means you can monitor your limb for any changes.

Keep using your swollen limb(s) for all your normal activities. Doing things around the house or in the garden is a form of exercise.

If you have been fitted into a compression garment, you should wear it when exercising.

Walking can be a good way to start exercising if you haven't done any exercise for a while. You can gradually increase the distance and pace. Other examples are yoga, Tai chi, Pilates, cycling, swimming or water aerobics.

Swimming is a good all-round exercise. The water supports the swollen limbs and allows ease of movement, particularly helpful if you have problems with your joints. If you cannot swim you can still benefit from doing exercises in the water.

Ideas for Moving

Try to do some exercise every day. Think about how you can build it into your daily routine as you are more likely to carry on doing exercise if it becomes a regular part of your day:

- Walking on the spot, walking with a pet, walking to a friend's home, walking with a friend/family member, walking groups
- It can be easy to include a walk in your daily schedule. Try walking instead of getting the bus or driving your car
- Parking further away from a shop entrance, or getting off at an earlier bus stop
- Walking from your house for 10-15 minutes then walking back home (use a timer/stopwatch!)
- Cleaning the house/gardening
- Hide the remote control for the television
- Activities like jogging, cycling, dancing
- Joining a gym/exercise class
- "Fun" exercise using a console (Wii, X-box or similar)

Tips

- If you have been fitted with a compression garment, then wear it for exercise to achieve the best muscle pump action
- Do a little exercise every day and build up to 30 minutes of activity, 5 days a week
- Set yourself goals. Sometimes keeping a diary of how much activity/exercise you do can be beneficial
- Drink plenty of water
- Wear sensible clothing and shoes

Remember, exercise does not have to be vigorous. It's about making exercise a daily part of your life. Walk more, use the stairs instead of the lift; basically move your body. Even people who cannot easily walk can gain excellent benefits if they do chair exercises or just stepping on the spot holding on to the sink or work surface. Small amounts of change add up and make a big change in your own self-management of lymphoedema.

Make moving your body a part of your life!

Contact Numbers:

We hope that you have found this information useful. If you have any questions or are worried about anything, please speak to the following Dorset County Hospital Staff:

Lymphoedema Nurses: EMMA DIAZ Tel: 01305 255370
 DAWN JOHNSTON
 LUCY HARRIS

Useful Contacts:

1. The Lymphoedema Support Network: Tel: 020 7351 4480

Website: www.lymphoedema.org/lsn

2. Cancer Research UK

Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/coping/physically/lymphoedema-and-cancer/treating/exercise

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If you have feedback regarding the accuracy of the information contained in this leaflet, or if you would like a list of references used to develop this leaflet, please email pals@dchft.nhs.uk



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