



York and Scarborough
Teaching Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Lymphoedema of the Lower Limbs

Information for patients, relatives and carers

① For more information, please contact:

Dermatology Department

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What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a swelling that arises because the lymph system is unable to work properly.

Oedema is excessive fluid in the tissues. Because of gravity it most commonly shows as swelling in the legs. There are several different causes of oedema. When the cause is due to poor lymphatic vessels, it is called lymphoedema.

Lymphatic vessels (or just “lymphatics”) are too thin to carry blood cells but they have the important function of carrying fluid (containing proteins) from the tissues back to the main blood circulation.

How is it caused?

Often the cause is not known. However, causes of poor lymphatic function include:

1. Being born with poorly functioning lymphatics, sometimes inherited from a parent, although the swelling may not begin until adult life.
2. Some infections can cause damage to lymphatics. In Britain, the commonest is the bacterium *Streptococcus*, which causes infection in the skin called cellulitis.

3. Certain parasitic infestations (mainly in tropical countries).
4. Cancer spreading to the lymphatics.
5. Unavoidable damage to lymphatics from surgery or radiotherapy.

When the lymphatic function is poor, water and protein can build up in the tissues under the skin. Some proteins can stimulate the formation of fibrous tissue and inflammatory processes. The leg can then have swelling, a bumpy surface, redness, discomfort, and stiffness under the skin. When the swelling is severe, deep folds may develop between swollen areas. In more severe cases, fluid may leak from the skin and there may be areas of skin breakdown called ulcers.

Lipoedema is another condition which causes swelling of the legs with similar symptoms to lymphoedema. If the doctor thinks you have this condition further explanation will be given, as this information booklet does not discuss Lipoedema.

Can lymphoedema be treated?

Lymphoedema **cannot be cured** because of the damage done to the lymphatic system but it can be controlled.

Treatment is ongoing and takes time and commitment from you as well as from the staff in the Dermatology Department.

What are the benefits of treatment?

The aim of the treatment is to improve the drainage of fluid, reduce the size of the swollen limb and to control the swelling long term.

Are there any risks with the treatment?

There are no known risks to the treatment or exercises described in this leaflet. If you are unsure about doing the exercises, please speak to the nurses and doctors.

Are there any alternatives to the treatment?

There are no alternatives to the treatment described in this leaflet.

What does the treatment involve?

This may vary depending on your individual medical requirements.

Treatment involves good skin care, bandaging or compression stockings, exercise, and being taught how to carry out a simple massage technique to help with your lymphatic drainage.

Treatment needs to be regular and consistent so it is important that you follow the guidance given.

Does my weight affect lymphoedema?

Being overweight puts additional pressure on your lymphatic system so, if this is the case, you should try to lose weight under the supervision from your doctor or nurse at your GP practice.

Why do I need to do to look after my skin?

You need to look after your skin for many reasons:

1. Small cracks or cuts are an ideal place for germs to enter your skin and multiply and this may result in the condition called cellulitis.
2. Signs of cellulitis: Your legs becoming hot, red, painful and maybe more swollen than usual. You may also feel unwell, be shivering or have 'flu-like' symptoms. If this occurs you need to see a doctor for antibiotic therapy. You also need to rest your legs and remove your stockings or bandages.
3. By taking good care of your skin, you will help to reduce the risk of infection. Using an emollient (moisturising cream) will help to keep skin supple and prevent it from becoming cracked and dry.

You should also try and prevent damage to your skin by avoiding cuts and grazes, taking care when cutting toe nails (use nail clippers) and ladies when shaving your legs. Make sure you wash and dry between your toes daily. Any fungal infection of the feet could allow bacteria in and should be treated. Look out for dry skin or cracks between the toes, or dry skin or blisters on the soles of your feet. Your doctor would prescribe any necessary antifungal cream or tablets.

Why do I need to wear compression stockings or compression bandages?

After a full assessment of your needs and baseline measurements of your legs have been taken, compression bandages may be applied by nurses to help reduce the fluid and support your legs.

This would involve a course of intensive bandaging that is carried out over approximately one month.

The bandages are worn constantly for this time and the calendar below shows when you should attend the hospital for re-bandaging.

First week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Second week	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Third week	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Fourth week	22	23	24	25	26	27	28

Due to the bulkiness, driving is not advised. If you choose to drive, please contact your insurance company or the DVLA for advice before commencing treatment.

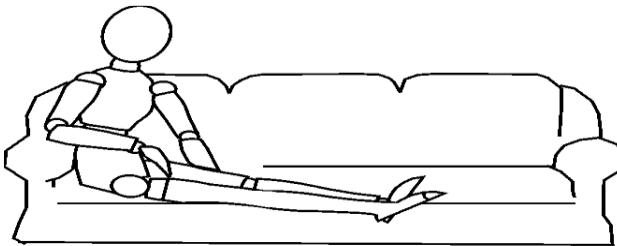
When the fluid in your legs has reduced the nurses will measure and correctly fit you for compression stockings.

If it is not possible for you to commit to a course of intensive bandaging, the nurse will instead measure you for a garment.

Why is exercise important?

Gravity plays a part in encouraging or discouraging swelling, so when you sit for or stand still for long periods, gravity pulls fluid downwards into your legs. Movement is important because the muscles in your legs act as pumps to counteract this effect and keep fluid flowing upwards.

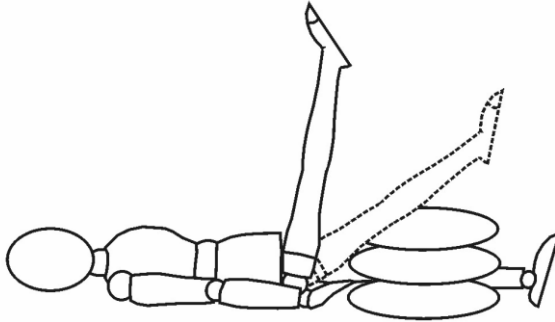
When resting, you should aim to sit with your legs raised level with your hips or higher if possible.



If you have to stand for long periods, try going up and down on your toes as this helps to work your calf muscles and keep the fluid moving upwards. If you are not very mobile, leg exercises help to prevent the joints stiffening and work the leg muscles, which are important for drainage.

Leg exercises

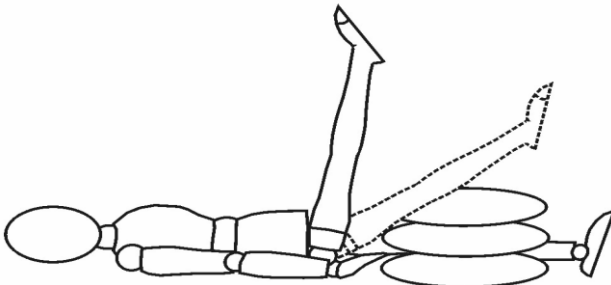
1. Best done lying on a bed or floor, with swollen leg raised on pillows or cushion.



- 2(a). Slowly bring knee up to chest.



- 2(b). Slowly straighten leg and lower gently to pillows. Repeat 10 times.



3(a). Slowly point foot towards floor, bring back as far as will go. Repeat 10 times.



3(b). Slowly rotate feet, making circular movements with toes, clockwise and anti-clockwise. Repeat 10 times.



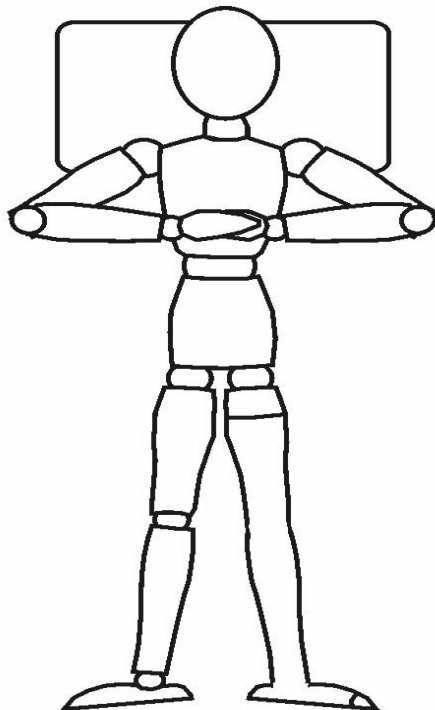
How does massage help?

The massage therapy used in the treatment of lymphoedema is known as lymph drainage massage. There are two types of this: 'Simple Lymphatic Drainage' as highlighted in this booklet also 'Manual Lymphatic Drainage', which is available by trained therapists in some specialist centres.

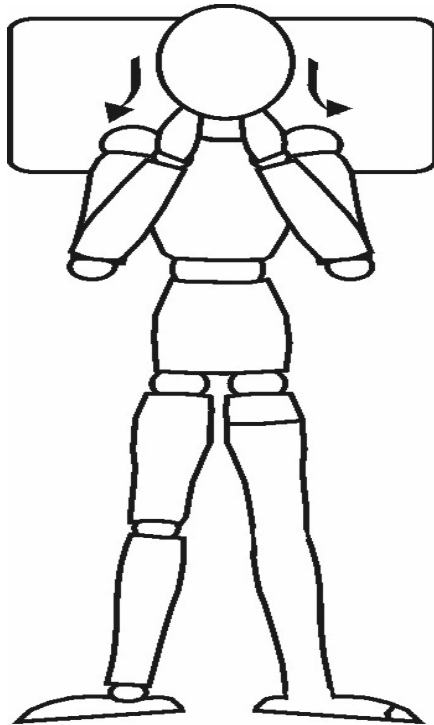
An example of one method of simple lymphatic drainage

1. Before starting it is important to do deep breathing, you will be shown how to take five deep breaths before you start your massage. This is also described below.

Place your hands high on your abdomen, overlapping your lower ribs. Fingers resting on the gap between your ribs at the front. Without arching your back, breathe slowly. Your fingers should rise as your abdomen expands. Hold for a slow count of two, breathe out slowly. Repeat four more times. Relax for a couple of minutes before getting up.



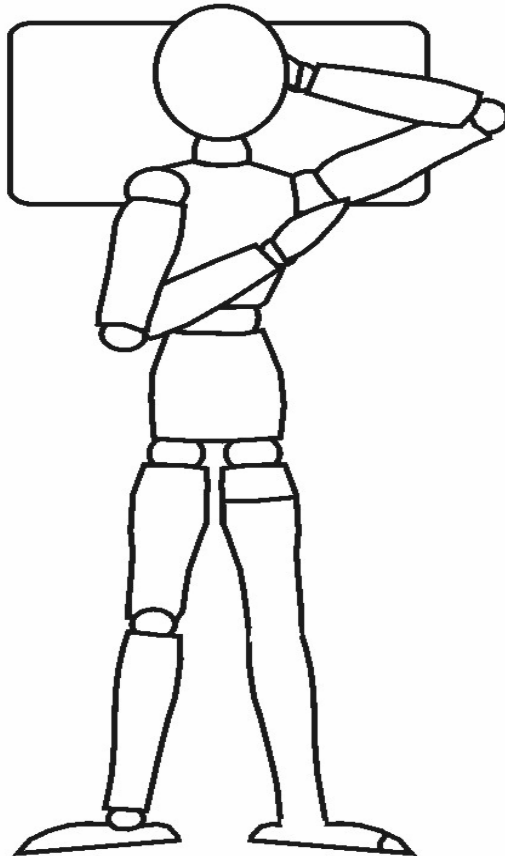
2. Position your hands at the side of your neck just below your ears. Then with a very gentle stretch of the skin downwards with minimal pressure for a count of 3 then release the skin. Rest for a count of three. Repeat this five times.



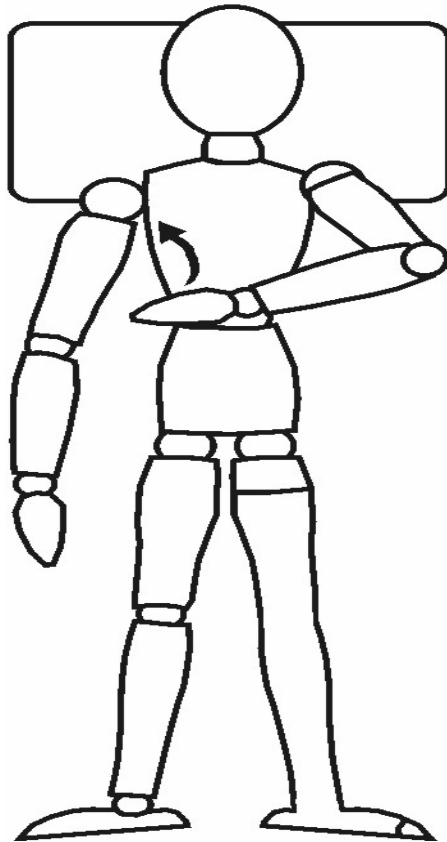
3. Place your hands on your shoulders so that they rest in the hollow area, you may find it easier if you cross your arms. With your fingers gently stretch towards your collarbone for a count of three and then release the skin. Then rest for a count of three. Repeat this five times.



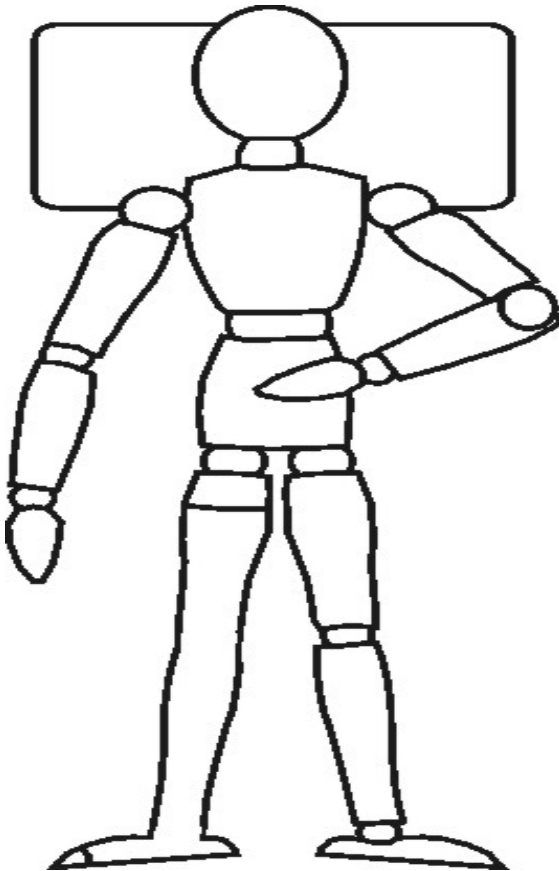
4. Place one hand behind your head with your elbow lifted a little from your side. Gently stretch upwards into your armpit for a count of three. Then release and rest for a count of three. Repeat this ten times



5. Starting on one side of your body, massage from your waistline upwards in the direction of the arrow using a gentle stretch for a count of three and release. Then rest of a count of three. Repeat on the other side of your body. Do this five times on each side of your body.



6. You will now work below your waistline on the side of your swelling, using upwards stretches towards your armpit. For a count of three release and rest for a count of three. If both sides are swollen you will need to massage each side on their own. Repeat five times.



7. Finish by repeating the breathing exercises described at point one.

How will I know I am making progress?

Regular reviews and monitoring of your progress is essential to ensure the treatment you are having is working. Regular follow up appointments will be required initially at the dermatology department. These will include a check up by the hospital doctor and the nurse. Regular measurements will be taken of your legs to check their limb volume and the fit of your garment. Once your lymphoedema is stable we aim to discharge you back to the care of your GP.

Useful local contact numbers and addresses

Dermatology Department at York Hospital - Nurses:

Tel: 01904 726629

Lymphoedema Support Network (LSN)

St. Luke's Crypt, Sydney Street, London SW3 6NH

Tel: 020 7351 4480

Website: www.lymphoedema.org/lisn

E-mail: adminlisn@lymphoedema.freeserve.co.uk

MLD UK

PO Box 14491, Glenrothes, Fife, KY6 3YE

Website: www.mlduk.org.uk

E-mail: info@mlduk.org.uk

British Lymphology Society

1 Webb's Court, Buckhurst Avenue, Sevenoaks, Kent,
TN13 1LZ

Tel: 01732 740850

Fax: 01732 459225

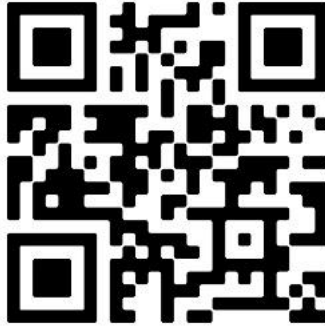
E-mail: helensnod@blsac.demon.co.uk

Lipoedema UK

Foxfield House, Chichester Road, West Wittering,
Chichester, West Sussex. PO20 8QB

E-mail: info@lipoedema.co.uk

Please scan the QR code below to view this information online:



Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:

Michelle Allott, Associate Practitioner with a Special Interest in Chronic Disease, Dermatology Department, York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE or telephone 01904 726629.

Teaching, training and research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net

An answer phone is available out of hours.

Leaflets in alternative languages or formats

Please telephone or email if you require this information in a different language or format, for example Braille, large print or audio.

如果你要求本資 不同的 或 式提供 , 電
或發電

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