

LYMPHOEDEMA SELF MANAGEMENT.

1. SKIN CARE

Skin Care is one of the cornerstones of lymphoedema management. For people with, or at risk of developing lymphoedema, skin care and observation should be an integral part of your daily routine.

Just below the skin is a vast network of superficial lymphatic vessels. These superficial vessels help to clear away any substance that is placed in or on the skin. With lymphoedema these superficial vessels are less able to clear these substances away; this may increase the risk of developing an infection which in turn can lead to an increase in swelling and further infection.

In the same way, broken, cracked or dry skin provides an entry point for infection. If you are able to prevent this from happening you can reduce the risk of infection and possible worsening of lymphoedema.

Lymphoedema increases the risk of infection and skin complications. Recurrent infections such as Cellulitis and inflammatory episodes can lead to fibrosis (skin thickening) and damage to the lymphatics.

By following simple precautions and basic skin care practices, one can significantly decrease the risk of infection as well as promote good condition of the skin and its underlying tissues.

DAILY SKIN CARE SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

CLEANSING

- Wash skin carefully with a soap-free wash as soap can irritate and dry out the skin. Liquid soaps and Aqueous cream make good substitutes.
- Pay particular attention to washing between fingers, toes and any skin folds. Pat rather than rub skin dry, taking care to dry thoroughly between fingers, toes and skin folds in order to avoid fungal infections.

MOISTURISING

- Keep skin well hydrated, smooth and supple by moisturising daily. Your lymphoedema therapist can advise on which moisturiser to use, or you can continue with your usual moisturiser if that works. The moisturiser should be applied liberally, and time allowed for absorption by the skin cells.
- Moisturiser is best applied at night, rather than in the morning, this way there is sufficient time allowed for absorption, and the limb won't be sticky when applying compression garments in the morning.

MONITORING YOUR SKIN

- Watch for signs of redness, abrasions, cuts, or insect bites; if they do occur, wash thoroughly with soap and water and apply antiseptic.
- If you notice any sign of infections (e.g. an area becomes hot, red and more swollen, this may even be associated with flu-like symptoms) seek medical attention as soon as possible as this could be cellulitis.
- In the event of an infection you need to see your doctor who may prescribe a regime of antibiotics for a minimum of 14 days, it is important to complete this course.
- Check for fungal infections between the toes or any skin folds and treat promptly, your GP will be able to advise you on this.

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Important Prevention Measures:

- If your upper limb is affected, wear protective gloves when gardening or washing up.
- Try to avoid cuts, scratches and insect bites, treat cuts etc. promptly with antiseptic cream.
- Protect the swollen arm or leg from sunburn by using a high factor sunscreen / sunblock.
- Use an electric razor if shaving a swollen area.
- Use nail clippers rather than nail scissors.
- If possible do not have injections / acupuncture into, or blood samples taken from, the swollen limb.
- Avoid having blood pressure reading taken from your affected arm.
- Do not wear tight clothing / shoes / jewellery.
- Try not to expose the swollen limb to high temperatures e.g. avoid excessively hot baths/showers, saunas, or heat packs applied to swollen area.