

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is the swelling of a part of the body due to a build-up of fluid in the skin. It usually affects the legs or arms, but can affect any part of the body.

A recent study suggested 100,000 people in the UK may be affected by this condition.

While it is not a painful condition, it can be extremely uncomfortable and can affect mobility and movement.

What causes lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema occurs when there is a problem with the lymphatic system.

The lymphatics form part of your immune system and are responsible for cleansing your tissues and maintaining a balance of fluids in your body.

If the lymphatic system is not working correctly, the fluid in the tissues builds up.

Types of lymphoedema

Lymphoedema can be described as primary or secondary.

Primary lymphoedema is usually determined from birth and arises due to the underdevelopment or failure of the lymphatic system.

It may develop without any obvious cause at different stages in life, but particularly in adolescence and during the menopause.

Secondary lymphoedema is the result of some problem outside of the lymphatic system that prevents it working properly. Examples of secondary lymphoedema are:

- Surgery - particularly when lymph nodes are removed after treatment for cancer (breast, prostate, gynaecological, head or neck, sarcoma or melanoma).
- Radiotherapy - this kills cancer cells, but it can also cause scar tissue that interrupts the normal flow of lymph.
- Injury or infection that may damage the lymph vessels. This could be anything from a fall to an insect bite.
- Reduced mobility/paralysis - muscle contractions during normal activity are important to help the lymph to move.
- Problems with veins such as varicose veins or after deep vein thrombosis or a blood clot - the lymph system becomes overloaded and unable to function effectively.
- Cancer itself may also result in blockages of the lymphatic system.

How we can help

Because the underlying causes of lymphoedema are usually irreversible, there is no permanent cure, but appropriate treatment can reduce the swelling and help people live with their condition long-term.

At Compton Hospice, our four specialist practitioners offer patients an individual plan that will give them the best chance of improvement, helping them live normal, active and independent lives.

Treatment will involve a combination of:

- Skin care - to moisturise and prevent infection
- Exercise - to aid natural drainage of lymph
- Compression hosiery - available to patients free of charge
- Multi layer lymphoedema bandaging - helps to improve the shape and size of severe swelling
- Simple lymphatic drainage - a skin moving technique similar to massage
- Medical lymphatic drainage - a more intense specialist massage technique
- Decongestive lymphatic therapy (DLT) - a course of daily treatments, combining some or all of the above, for up to three weeks to achieve a more rapid improvement
- Pneumatic compression therapy

How patients can help themselves

The treatment of lymphoedema is very much a two-way partnership and to achieve real improvements, the patient needs to commit to managing their condition at home.

Once our specialist team has agreed a treatment package of care, a lot of emphasis is placed on self-management.

This will include completing suggested exercises, keeping up a skincare regime and attending regular appointments for sessions with a practitioner to undergo further treatment and to monitor progress.

How you can help us

As a charitable organisation, our time is very valuable as it is paid for through donations to the hospice. We are able to operate because of the generosity of the local community and we feel a responsibility to use our time and resources efficiently and effectively.

To help us do this, and to be respectful to those who donate funds to enable us to function, we ask that patients:

- adhere to their appointment times
- contact us as early as possible to re-arrange or cancel scheduled sessions
- only use our transport if absolutely necessary