

Skin care and infection in lymphoedema

Maintaining healthy skin is vital if you have lymphoedema. The skin of a swollen limb is fragile and tends to be dry, so is therefore susceptible to damage and infection. It is important to take good care of your skin to keep it soft and supple and help to avoid infection.

How should I look after my skin?

- Wash the affected area daily and dry your skin carefully.
- Moisturise every day. Take care with perfumed products, which may irritate your skin. As a guide use up to 4 tablespoons on your trunk, up to two tablespoons on a leg and up to one tablespoon on an arm.
- Use gentle strokes to apply the cream in the most comfortable way and finish with a downward stroke in the direction of the hair line. This helps to reduce irritation and spots forming at the hair follicles.
- If using any form of compression garment (such as arm sleeve or leg hosiery), do not moisturise directly before putting your garment on. This prevents the cream being absorbed into your skin, and also affects the fibres of your garment, which can prevent it from working effectively. It will also make application of the garment more difficult. Instead try moisturising in the evening – by the morning the emollient should be well absorbed into your skin.
- Treat any cuts or scratches on the swollen area immediately. Clean with warm water and apply an antiseptic cream or spray. If the cut is deep, use a dry dressing or plaster. See your GP as soon as possible if you notice any signs of infection.
- Treat insect bites on the swollen area immediately with an antihistamine cream and avoid scratching. See your GP as soon as possible if you notice any signs of infection.

What if my skin is dry or problematic?

- Wash your skin with warm water and a neutral bland soap/shower gel or bath/shower emollient every day.
- If there is swelling present in your finger/toes, make sure that you carefully wash all areas and dry well to stop fungal infections which can develop in moist, warm, undisturbed areas.
- Use a non-perfumed cream or lotion such as aqueous cream or an emollient prescribed by your GP.

How do I help prevent infection?

The limb with lymphoedema is more susceptible to infection. If an infection develops this can lead to further damage to the lymphatic system and eventually make your lymphoedema worse. Infection can enter the body through:

- small breaks in the skin surface through trauma (injury)
- some skin conditions that cause the skin to break (including athlete's foot)
- dry, flaky or cracked skin
- in-growing or badly kept nails and fungal toenail infections.

To help avoid skin damage and infections:

- use an insect repellent to avoid bites
- protect skin from sunburn by using high factor sunscreens and covering/sheltering skin where possible
- take care when cutting nails – avoid damaging the cuticles by cutting them too harshly
- avoid wet shaving, waxing and epilators
- avoid extreme changes in temperature – for example, don't have bath water too hot; avoid saunas and steam rooms.

If you have arm lymphoedema:

- Consider wearing gloves when gardening, washing up, using harsh detergents, or handling hot plates or pans etc.
- Avoid having blood samples taken from the swollen area. The risk of a medical procedure making the oedema worse is small but should be avoided if possible.
- Use a thimble when sewing.

If you have a swollen leg:

- Keep legs covered when gardening to prevent any cuts or scratches.
- Avoid walking around barefoot, especially on the beach. Wear wet shoes in the sea.

Infection

If the affected area becomes red, more swollen or painful these may be signs of infection (cellulitis).

What is cellulitis?

Cellulitis is an infection of the skin that is more common in lymphoedema. The symptoms can develop quickly and get quite severe. The first sign of this sort of infection is when an area of your skin (usually around the site of the lymphoedema) becomes red, tender and warm. You may start to feel unwell with flu-like symptoms.

It is vital that if these symptoms develop you see your GP immediately and be prescribed antibiotics.

There is a national consensus document guiding the best practice/treatment of cellulitis for Lymphoedema patients which can be found at: <https://thebls.com/public/uploads/documents/document-75091530863967.pdf>

Contact us

If you have any questions please contact:

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Please let reception know if your call is urgent.

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