

# Skin care and infection in lymphoedema

If you have lymphoedema, maintaining healthy skin is vital as the skin of a swollen limb can be fragile and more vulnerable to damage and infection.

The skin is a very important organ with several functions, including acting as a barrier to help prevent infections and stop fluid loss. As we age we are more susceptible to having dry skin. This is because the sebum – a natural skin oil – is not produced as effectively. The skin's cells shrink, allowing gaps/cracks between the cells, which then allows greater moisture loss and the ingress (entrance) of irritants or infection.

Healthy skin is well hydrated, intact, has good colour, is warm to touch and has no rashes or irregularities. It is important to take good care of your skin to keep it soft and supple and to help avoid infections. If the skin is already damaged, then good skin care will help it to heal and reduce the risk of further damage.

## How should I look after my skin?

- Keep the affected area clean and dry. Wash the area daily and pat dry with a clean towel.
- Moisturise regularly to keep the skin soft and supple. Using an emollient (moisturiser) after washing is often the best time to help replace lost skin oils. Take care with perfumed products as they can sensitise the skin. As a guide, use a small palmful of emollient on an arm, two on a leg and up to four on your body.
- Apply the emollient using gentle strokes, finishing with a downward stroke in the direction of hair growth. This helps to reduce irritation and spots forming in the hair follicles (folliculitis).
- Moisturise in the evening to allow emollient to fully absorb into the skin. Avoid moisturising directly before putting on compression garments as this prevents the emollient being absorbed into your skin and affects the fibres of the garment, which prevents it from working effectively. It will also make the application of the garment more difficult, which can then cause damage to the skin. If you need to moisturise before applying your garment, wait for the emollient to fully absorb first. Gel emollients often absorb more quickly so can reduce the time needed between moisturising and applying your compression garment.
- **Caution – many emollients contain ingredients that are flammable.** Please be careful to ensure any product used is fully absorbed into your skin before applying your compression garment. This will reduce the fire risk but also prolong the life of the garment.
- Try to prevent any breaks in your skin, such as sunburn or insect bites, that can allow an infection to develop. (See avoiding infection for further information).

## What if my skin is dry or problematic?

Dry or damaged skin may be flaking, hardened, bruised, broken, ulcerated or leaking. Dry skin is much more likely to be itchy. As well as following the advice above, you should:

- Wash your skin with warm water and a non-perfumed soap/shower gel or soap substitute every day. This will help reduce itching, restore the moisture content of your skin, and reduce the chances of irritation, cellulitis, or infection. Your therapist can advise if soaks are recommended.
- Pat the skin dry and gently remove any flaking areas or areas of hard skin – there are specialist products that can be recommended if necessary.
- Make sure you carefully wash all areas – remove any previous emollient and dead skin cells, especially if there is swelling present in fingers or toes, or there are deep creases in your skin due to the swelling.
- Dry well to stop fungal infections which can develop in moist, warm, undisturbed areas. If you notice any signs of fungal infections such as athlete's foot or fungal toenails, obtain advice and suitable treatment from a pharmacist or GP.
- Use a non-perfumed emollient, or one prescribed by your GP.
- Drink plenty of water to rehydrate from the inside.
- Try to remain active – keeping ourselves mobile is really important to ensure a good blood supply and fluid exchange. Avoid standing, sitting or staying in one position for too long.

## Looking after leaking skin (lymphorrhoea)

Lymphorrhoea is leakage of lymph fluid through your skin. It can be caused by your skin being so tight with lymphoedema that it cannot drain through the normal lymph vessels. When your skin is very tight any knock, pinprick, or crack in the skin can cause leakage. Lymphorrhoea can be effectively treated but may take a few days to get under control. Because our skin acts as a protective cover around us, any breaks in the skin can lead to infection (cellulitis), fluid loss, feeling cold, and increased pain. Surrounding skin areas can get soggy and break down too. If clothing or furnishings become wet, they will need regular cleaning/washing.

- Carefully clean and pat dry the leaking area with a clean towel. Apply a moisturiser on the surrounding skin to protect it from getting too wet and breaking down.
- Use a soft, non-stick dressing to protect the broken area and absorb the leakage. If there is a lot of leakage, layers of padding or pads may be needed.
- Compression treatment in the form of bandaging, compression garments or wraps is perhaps the most important part of your treatment. Your therapist will discuss with you the best way to manage the lymphorrhoea.
- If your legs are affected, sitting with your legs up will be helpful, along with exercise and movement. Try to keep your ankles and toes moving and doing lots of foot exercises when you are sitting. Avoid standing or sitting with your legs down for long periods.

The leaking usually stops within 48 hours of effective compression being applied, but if there is a lot of skin breakdown it will take longer for this to heal. Once the lymphorrhoea has stopped, it is really important that we prevent it from happening again. This means that the underlying lymphoedema is effectively treated. This can be managed with hosiery/compression garments, lymphatic drainage, self-massage, weight management and skin care. Your therapist will advise you.

## Avoiding an infection

Unfortunately, any area with lymphoedema is more susceptible to infection, and if you have had previous infections in that area then you are more likely to get further infections. Prevention of infection is a really important component to managing your lymphoedema. Infections can enter the body through:

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

To avoid skin damage and infections:

- Try to prevent any breaks in the skin that can allow an infection to develop. If you do get any cuts or scratches in the swollen area then treat it immediately – clean with warm water and apply an antiseptic cream or spray. If the cut is deep, use a dry dressing or plaster. If you notice any signs of infection (increasing redness, heat, or pain) see your GP as soon as possible.
- Try to prevent insect bites and sunburn – keep the affected area covered by clothing and use an insect repellent if necessary. If you do get bitten on any swollen area, treat immediately with an antihistamine (insect bite cream) and avoid scratching. Using cool packs can help to reduce the irritation, and keep the area elevated if it becomes more swollen. If you notice any signs of infection, seek medical advice as soon as possible.
- Take care when cutting nails – avoid damaging the cuticles by cutting them too harshly. Try not to bite nails. If you use any compression garments it may be helpful to keep nails short to avoid any trauma when putting garments on.
- Avoid wet shaving, waxing and epilators – try using an electric razor or depilatory cream instead.
- Take care if using hot tubs, saunas or very hot baths/showers. Prolonged exposure to hot water will dry your skin, depleting it of essential oils and making your skin worse. Use an emollient afterwards to protect the skin.

## 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 affected arm. The risk of a medical procedure making the oedema worse is small but should be avoided if possible.
- Avoid having injections to a swollen arm or an 'at risk' arm.
- Use a thimble when sewing.

## If you have leg lymphoedema:

- To prevent any cuts or scratches, keep legs covered when gardening or walking in the countryside.
- Avoid walking barefoot, especially on the beach – wear beach shoes in the sea.

## 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 the skin (usually in the area of the lymphoedema) becomes red/darker, tender and increasingly warm. You may start to feel unwell with flu-like symptoms. The area of redness/discolouration can continue to get larger. **It is vital that if these symptoms develop you contact 111 or see your GP immediately to be prescribed antibiotics.** Do not wait until the next day or after the weekend. Continue using your compression garment if you have one and it is not too painful to wear. If you are unable to wear your garment then remove and try to reapply after 24 or 48 hours.

If this is not possible then contact your therapist for advice.

There is a national consensus document on the best treatment for cellulitis for people who have lymphoedema. It can be found at: <https://thebls.com/public/uploads/documents/document-75091530863967.pdf>

## Contact us

If you have any questions please contact:

### Lymphoedema Clinic

Mon – Fri 8am – 4pm

Tel: 01872 252885 or 252601

Email: [rch-tr.lymphoedema@nhs.net](mailto:rch-tr.lymphoedema@nhs.net)

Please let reception know if your call is urgent.

For further information and support please visit our website:

<https://royalcornwallhospitals.nhs.uk/services/lymphoedema-and-lipoedema/>



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