

Breast lymphoedema

What is this?

Breast lymphoedema can occur after treatment for breast cancer. Following surgery and radiotherapy, some breast oedema (swelling) is common, but this usually settles down gradually over a period of up to eight weeks. Breast lymphoedema is a swelling, which persists after the initial eight weeks, and can develop with or without arm swelling. There may also be permanent changes to your breast as a result of the treatment you have undergone, such as scarring, shape or size changes and differences (asymmetry) between your breasts.

Who is at risk?

There are several risk factors which may increase your likelihood of developing breast lymphoedema:

- the extent of surgery to the axilla (armpit) (removal of lymph nodes from the axilla)
- radiotherapy to the breast and/or axilla
- post-surgery complications such as seroma (collection of fluid) and cording (tightness or pulling of cords from the chest wall or arm)
- lack of support to the breasts from a supportive bra
- infection after surgery such as cellulitis
- being overweight
- large or pendulous breasts (cup size larger than C).

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Fullness, discomfort and heaviness – these may occur before there is any visible swelling.
- Swelling in the breast – this can be identified by assessing for any new breast asymmetry or indentations from your bra strap and seams, that are greater on the affected side.
- Skin changes – the swollen breast may be flushed or darker in colour, or have the appearance of orange peel (peau d'orange).

How is it treated?

Breast lymphoedema is best managed with a combination of approaches. For the best results self-management is essential.

Do:

- Wear a well-fitting, firm, supportive bra during the day (see bra fitting).
- Wear a sleep/soft cup bra overnight to support the breast and prevent further build-up of fluid in dependent areas. This is particularly important for large breasts.
- Look after your skin – make sure you wash and dry your breast and under your breast thoroughly each day to prevent infection. Apply moisturiser to your breast to keep the skin in good condition.
- Maintain a healthy weight – if you are overweight, try to reduce your weight, as weight loss will improve lymphoedema.
- Keep active – exercise and movement is important to improve lymphatic flow. Try to use your arm and shoulder normally and continue your arm exercises as advised prior to your surgery / radiotherapy.

Other treatments that may help include:

- Specialised lymphatic massage called manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) or simple lymphatic drainage (SLD). This is a form of skin massage using specialised skin movements to redirect fluid from congested areas to unaffected areas. Your lymphoedema therapist will assess you and give further advice if this treatment is recommended for you.
- Kinesiotape is a medical adhesive tape which may be applied to encourage drainage in the swollen breast and relieve congestion.
- Lymph padding can be worn inside the bra to add more support and compression to the breast.

What bra is best?

A well-fitting firm and supportive bra is essential to support the breast and allow fluid to drain. As soon as you are able to, following treatment, you should return to wearing a supportive bra. We do not advise an underwired bra as this can affect lymphatic drainage from the breast. Firm support or sports bras with deep cups, wide supportive straps, and wide side panels are recommended.

Following treatment, it is important to be re-measured to ensure you are wearing the correct sized bra. Fluctuations in weight can affect the size of your bra and therefore you should be measured regularly to ensure you are wearing the correct size.

If the unaffected breast is larger you will need a pad or prosthesis to ensure the affected breast is well supported in the cup. You can purchase a small silicone pad from bra shops (cleavage booster) or if you need more padding, then your Breast Care Team can arrange for you to be seen and measured at the Mermaid centre.

Tips to ensure you are wearing the correct bra:

- The band of your bra should fit firmly but comfortably around the narrowest part of your back. You should (just) be able to fit two fingers under the band once it is fastened. The band should be the same height all the way round and should not ride up at the back.
- Fasten your bra on the middle hook as this allows movement for weight fluctuation and allows you to tighten it up as the bra stretches.
- The side support section should be wide/deep to offer maximum support to this area and lie flat against your body.
- Both breasts should fit neatly into the cups of the bra and be enclosed. Nothing should be spilling out below or over the top (cup too small). There should be no wrinkling of the fabric (cup too big).
- The middle part of the bra, between the breasts, should lie flat against your body.
- Before adjusting the straps, check the breasts are in a natural position (usually half way between shoulders and elbow). There should be no digging in or straps slipping off the shoulder. Choose a bra with wide straps and regularly check and adjust the straps as washing and wearing can loosen straps.

Contact us

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