

# Breast lymphoedema

## What is this?

Breast or chest wall lymphoedema (swelling) often happens following breast cancer treatment. This is due to damage to the lymphatics in your breast and under your arm. It can affect your breast, underarm or back and can occur with or without arm lymphoedema.

## Who is at risk?

Around one in four women treated for breast cancer will develop some breast lymphoedema. There are several risk factors which may increase your likelihood of developing it:

- 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 affected breast from a supportive bra, especially if one breast is now smaller and does not fill the cup properly
- infection after surgery, such as cellulitis
- being overweight
- larger or pendulous breasts (cup size larger than C)
- African, African Caribbean and Hispanic women.

## What are the signs and symptoms?

- Fullness, discomfort and heaviness – these may occur before there is any visible swelling.
- Swelling in the breast – look 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, skin may feel thicker, harder or have the appearance of orange peel (peau d'orange).

## How is it treated?

Lymphoedema cannot be cured but the symptoms can be reduced and managed with a combination of treatment and self-management. Early intervention is key. Once the lymphoedema has been diagnosed, daily self-management will increase the chance of controlling your symptoms.

Things you can do:

- Wear a well-fitting, firm, supportive bra during the day.
- 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 are 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.
- Gently move your breast – gently moving or jiggling the affected breast to encourage lymphatic drainage. This can be done throughout the day.
- Self-lymphatic drainage massage for the breast. Please view the Lymphoedema Support Network video on how to do this on our website. (Find it under treatment and self management / self lymphatic drainage for the breast.)

Other treatments that may help include:

- Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD) – 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.
- Kinesio tape is a medical adhesive tape, which may be applied to encourage drainage in the swollen breast and relieve congestion. You will be taught how to use this, if needed.
- Lymph padding can be worn inside the bra to add more support and compression to the breast.
- Scar massage and gentle massage to release the tissues.
- Compression in the form of a bra or night garment.

## **Which bra is best?**

A well-fitting firm and supportive bra is essential to support the breast and allow fluid to drain. Following treatment, you should return to wearing a supportive bra as soon as you are able. If possible, avoid underwired bras as these may affect lymphatic drainage from the breast. It can be difficult to get a good fit (especially for larger cup sizes) without wiring. If you are wearing an underwired bra make sure the wiring cups the whole breast with no cutting in. Full support, post-surgical 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 make sure you are wearing the correct sized bra. Fluctuations in weight can affect your bra size, so get measured regularly to ensure you are wearing the correct size.

If the affected breast is smaller, you will need a pad or prosthesis to make sure this breast is well supported in the cup. You can buy a small silicone pad from bra shops (cleavage booster) or if you need more padding, your Breast Care Team can arrange for you to be seen and measured for a prosthesis at the Cove.

A softer bra may help at nighttime, especially if the breast is tender or you notice the swelling gets worse overnight.

## 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.
- Bra extenders are not recommended because they alter the relative position of the cups and straps and force the breasts closer together.

## Tips for putting your bra on:

- The ideal way to put on a front fastening bra is to position the shoulder straps first and then lean forward, placing each breast in the bra cup. Fasten the back of the bra and adjust the cups and breast tissue slightly so that the bra is comfortable and the breasts well supported. This switches from front to back fastening?
- Some people prefer to fasten the bra first and then 'twizzle' it round to the back. It is still important to ensure the breasts are well supported.
- You may find it helpful to 'lift and drop' each breast into the bra cup, especially if your breasts are larger.

## Contact us

### Lymphoedema Clinic

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Further information can be found on our Website

Search for Cornwall Lymphoedema or <https://royalcornwallhospitals.nhs.uk/services/lymphoedema-and-lipoedema/>

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