NHS
Royal Cornwall Hospitals
NHS Trust

Obesity related lymphoedema

Who is this leaflet for?

The aim of this leaflet is to explain the link between obesity and lymphoedema (swelling). Obesity related lymphoedema occurs in both legs and feet. It can also be present in the abdomen and affect the groin and genital area.

In order to see if you are overweight or obese we make a calculation using your height and weight to give a body mass index or BMI:

- a BMI greater than or equal to 25 is defined as overweight
- a BMI greater than or equal to 30 is defined as obese.

If you are overweight or obese you will need to lose weight to achieve good results from your oedema management. However, it is even more important to stabalise your weight and not keep gaining further weight.

How does obesity cause lower limb oedema?

- Fatty tissue increases the amount of lymph fluid in your tissues and overburdens your lymphatic vessels so that they are unable to drain the tissues efficiently.
- Fatty tissue increases the pressure on lymphatic vessels, stopping them working effectively.
- Obesity often causes your breathing to be less efficient. Breathing helps lymph fluid and blood move around the body, so less efficient breathing adversely affects lymphatic drainage.
- It may be more difficult to be active if you are overweight or obese – when we exercise or are active the muscles help pump fluid away from our limbs and stop it pooling in legs and feet.
- The weight of your abdomen creates pressure on the inguinal vessels in your groin, making venous and lymphatic return from your legs less efficient.

People who are obese:

- often sleep in an armchair because of difficulty breathing and this makes it more difficult for the lymphatics and veins to drain the legs efficiently.
- are more likely to have poorly functioning veins that in turn can lead to swelling.
- often have other health problems that also contribute to leg swelling.

Can it be treated?

Lymphoedema is a long-term condition as the lymphatic system cannot be repaired, so any damage to it will be permanent. However, if obesity is the cause of lymphoedema, the lymphatic channels may recover when the strain on your system is reduced and this can be dramatically improved with weight loss.

It is possible to control the leg oedema and prevent further complications with treatment and ongoing self-management.

The aim of treatment is to improve fluid drainage, thereby reducing the swelling and keeping it under control. Treatment involves one or more of the following:

- skin care
- compression stockings
- exercise
- learning how to manage it yourself.

How can I achieve and maintain a healthy weight?

Healthy eating:

- Ask your GP or Practice Nurse for advice on weight loss. Some GP practices provide weight management support or are able to refer patients to a weight loss support group such as Slimming World or Weight Watchers. They may also refer you to a dietician.
- Consider joining a weight loss programme such as Cornwall Healthy Weight, Slimming World or Weight Watchers.

Increase your activity:

- Increase your activity – aim to be active for at least 30 minutes a day and minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (sitting) for extended periods.
- Ask for advice at your GP surgery about exercise and getting active. You may be able to be referred for free exercise activities such as swimming or use of an approved gym.
- Do the exercises recommended by the Lymphoedema team.

Useful resources

British Heart Foundation

Information and advice on healthy eating and weight loss.
www.bhf.org.uk/~/media/files/publications/healthy-eating-and-drinking/m2_facts_not_fads_weight.pdf

NHS choices

12 week weight loss plan
www.nhs.uk/Livewell/weight-loss-guide/Pages/losing-weight-getting-started.aspx

Cornwall Healthy Weight

Run both Healthy Eating and Physical Activity courses throughout the county. You can book yourself onto a course or if you feel you need additional support discuss this with your therapist.

Tel: 01209 215666.
See also www.cornwallhealthyweight.org.uk/your-healthy-weight/adults/

Get Active Cornwall

The website has tips on how to increase your activity and information on activities and groups across Cornwall.

www.getactivecornwall.co.uk

Walking for Health

Walking for Health is England's largest network of health walk schemes, run by the Ramblers and Macmillan Cancer Support. They have organised health walks in Cornwall which are free and the leaders make sure no one gets left behind. Short and over easy terrain, they are open to everyone on a drop in basis but are especially aimed at those who are least active, with lower physical ability or long term conditions.

Tel: 020 7339 8541
www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/

There are weight loss groups in many areas such as Weight Watchers and Slimming World. Information can be found locally.

Contact us

Lymphoedema Clinic

Mon – Fri 8.00-16.00

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