Exercise and activity for lymphoedema

Why is physical exercise important?

Exercise and activity is vital in lymphoedema management to help your muscles pump lymph fluid through your body, keep your joints supple and help you to achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

The type of activity you choose to do will probably depend on your age and level of fitness. Try to find an activity that you particularly enjoy as this will encourage you to keep going. The current evidence on activity and lymphoedema indicates that activity **does not** cause or worsen lymphoedema. However, we recommend that you monitor your lymphoedema when starting any new activity or exercise programme.

How much activity should I do?

- Any movement or new activity is good - heel raises, bending knees/elbows, rotating feet/hands, gentle stretching and deep breathing.
- Try to do a little exercise every day and build up to 30 minutes of activity each day.
- Gently increase your level of activity, gradually building up your strength and endurance. Take regular breaks. Don't overstrain yourself and only exercise to your level of endurance. As you become fitter, you will be able to do more and still feel comfortable.
- If you find that your limb is swelling more or aching after the exercise, it may mean that you have done too much. Rest the limb and cut back a little bit the next time.
- If your mobility is limited you can still exercise in a chair or on a bed. See overleaf for some suggestions.

Do's:

- It is important to warm up before exercising and cool down and stretch properly at the end, as the affected limb does not adjust well to sudden changes in activity and as a result it may become more swollen.
- Wear your compression garment when exercising as it helps to support the affected area and helps with the lymph flow during exercise. Wear your garment for at least an hour after exercise to support your limb as it recovers from the exertion.

Don'ts:

- Avoid overdoing exercise or activity as this could make the swelling worse.
- Do not push yourself to continue with an exercise that causes any pain. Stay within your pain-free range. If movement is tight, stretch your limb slowly and gently.
- Do not exercise when you are being treated for a skin infection (cellulitis) as this may spread the infection.

Can I go to the gym?

Yes. If you would like to exercise with weights, start with low weights and low repetitions gradually progressing. If you go to a gym class or activity, let your instructor know that you have lymphoedema and why you may not be able to do all the exercises. Avoid exercises that involve holding postures with full weight bearing through the arms.

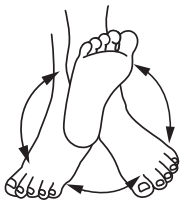
Can I go swimming?

- Yes. You will probably find you do not need to wear a compression garment when swimming or exercising in the water as the water will support your limb. If you are wearing a wet suit this will also support your limb. However, put on your compression garment as soon as possible after swimming, once you have dried the limb well.

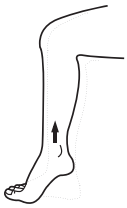
- If you feel more supported wearing your compression garment in the water use an old garment as the chlorine will affect the compression.

Exercises for lower limb lymphoedema

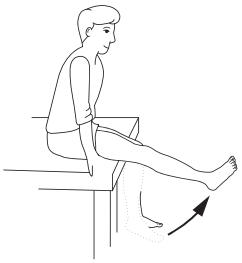
- Repeat 10 times both sides.
- You can increase the number of repetitions as you get stronger.



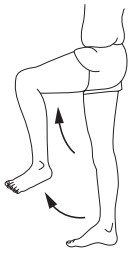
1. Roll your foot in a circle.
2. Repeat in the opposite direction.



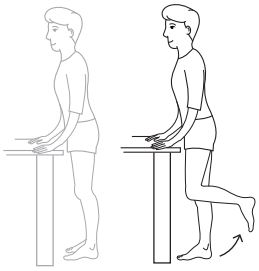
1. Place your foot flat on the floor.
2. Tap your heels.



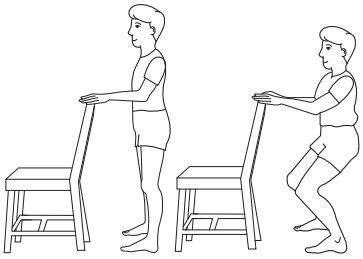
1. Sit with your feet down.
2. Straighten and bend your knee.



1. Stand holding onto a firm surface (eg table).
2. Lift one foot off the floor as high as you can.
3. Slowly lower back down.



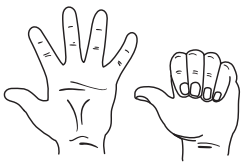
1. Bend your knee, lifting your foot up behind.
2. Slowly lower back down.



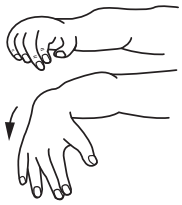
Slowly bend both your knees and then slowly stand back up.

Exercises for upper limb lymphoedema

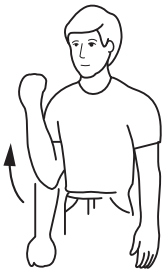
- Repeat 5 times both sides.
- You can increase the number of repetitions as you get stronger.



Open and close your hand.



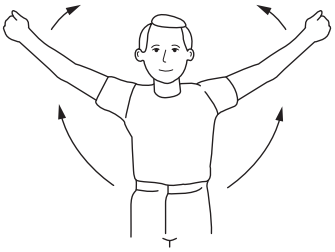
Move your wrist forward and back.



Bend an straighten your elbow.

Roll your shoulders in a backward direction.

Lift your hand up toward the ceiling and gently lower back down.



Raise arms from your side up above your head and gently lower back down.

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For further information including exercise videos please see our website and QR code:

www.royalcornwall.nhs.uk/services/therapies/occupational-therapy/lymphoedema/

If you would like this leaflet in large print, braille, audio version or in another language, please contact the General Office on 01872 252690

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