



Caring For Your Arm

Information for patients with
lymphoedema

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The Cancerkin Centre

The Cancerkin Centre is a special place, designed to help patients enhance their wellbeing and meet the challenges brought about by breast cancer and its treatment.

Cancerkin was set up in 1987 as the first hospital-based, dedicated breast cancer charity in the UK, concerned with treatment, supportive care, education and research. Our philosophy is 'Treat the patient, not just the cancer'. The name 'Cancerkin' also reflects concern with the welfare of the patient's family and friends as their needs are served in a variety of ways.

Patients can benefit from a choice of therapies, all widely acknowledged as being a positive influence on physical and mental wellbeing. All Cancerkin's services are free to patients, regardless of where they are being treated. It is important to note that the therapies offered by Cancerkin are complementary and not alternative.

Introduction

This booklet is about caring for your arm and offers advice on coping with some of the day to day problems of living with lymphoedema.

With changes in the skin and underlying tissue caused by lymphoedema, the affected limb becomes prone to infection. The skin may become dry, flaky and it may crack. The underlying tissue may thicken and fibrose (become more solid).

Lymphatic fluid, full of extra protein and trapped in the tissues, provides perfect conditions for developing infection, bacteria having entered through dry, broken skin.

Medical attention should be sought immediately at any sign of infection, e.g. redness, hot, painful stiffness, increased swelling or feeling unwell, shivery or feverish. If you cannot contact your GP you should go to your local hospital's A&E department. Antibiotics may be required.

Recurrent infections will increase damage to the lymphatics, aggravating the whole problem. Therefore, it is important to protect the affected arm, in order to prevent the lymphoedema from becoming worse.

Please read this booklet carefully and feel free to clarify any points with one of the lymphoedema therapists.

Some helpful hints

1. Avoid carrying very heavy items with the affected arm and avoid carrying handbags on the affected shoulder. If wearing a backpack, make sure there is no undue pressure on the affected side.
2. Use the arm as normally as possible when going about daily activities. But avoid sleeping on the affected side - a pillow can prevent you rolling over.
3. Wear rubber gloves for housework and protective gloves when gardening. Take care with kitchen knives, hotplates, grills, ovens, hot water, animals etc. to avoid cuts, burns and scratches.
4. Never offer the affected arm for injection, for the taking of blood or blood pressure, nor for acupuncture. Wear a thimble when sewing.
5. Avoid excessive sun on the arm and protect against insect bites.
6. If you want to put any substance on your affected arm e.g. deodorant, suntan lotion, try it out first on the forearm of your unaffected arm for 24 hours.
7. When removing hair from the armpit, use cream or an electric razor only.
8. Avoid wearing restrictive clothing or tight jewellery on the affected arm.
9. Excessive heat will aggravate lymphoedema, so avoid taking hot showers and baths and saunas. Make sure the water temperature is comfortable. In hot climates, sponging the arm with cool water may help.

Essential skin care

Treatment for lymphoedema begins with good skin care

1. Make sure the skin is dried well after washing and bathing, especially between the fingers, to avoid fungal infection. Dry with a soft towel, taking special care of delicate areas.
2. Using gentle, upward strokes, apply unscented oil or moisturising cream to the whole arm, starting with the hand. Make sure it is completely absorbed before putting on a containment sleeve. Daily treatment is vital, to keep the skin soft and supple and thereby reduce the risk of infection. Aqueous cream is ideal for this purpose. Ask for it over the counter at any pharmacy – it is cheap and effective.
3. Avoid contact with chemicals or harsh abrasives. Wear rubber gloves over the containment hand piece or mitt, if worn for washing up and other household chores.
4. Wear long sleeves and protective gloves when gardening. Avoid handling and pruning thorny or prickly plants and shrubs.
5. Take care when cutting your nails. Use emery boards or clippers rather than scissors. Use cream or oil to soften the cuticles but do not cut or push them back.

Clothing

Useful Guidelines and Ideas

- Avoid restrictive clothing, including underwear and nightwear, sleeves and cuffs.
- Choose natural materials wherever possible, rather than synthetics which cause excessive heat and perspiration.
- Front fastening bras may be easier to cope with, in some cases. Small pads can be obtained to support shoulder straps and prevent them from cutting or chafing. Buy bras with wide shoulder straps.
- Rings, bracelets and wristwatches should not be worn on the affected arm.
- Use your arm as normally as possible and do not wear a sling. A sling can restrict circulation in the arm and make the lymphoedema worse.

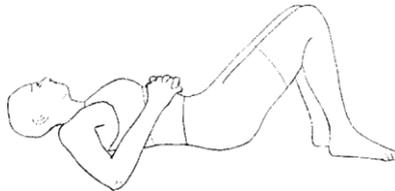
Exercise therapy

Use your arm as normally as possible. Movement of the limb helps drainage of fluid and maintains joint mobility. The type of exercise you do will depend on the pain, swelling and skin condition of your arm.

Daily exercise (as recommended by your therapist) should be a routine part of everyday life. If you have a sleeve and/or a mitt, wear it while exercising, as this will aid the lymphatic flow.

A selection of arm exercises

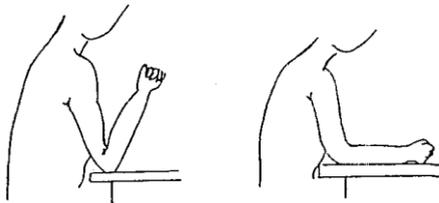
1. First, a breathing exercise to help lymphatic drainage. Lie down on your back with knees bent, with hands resting on your stomach. Breathe in steadily. Let your stomach expand. Breathe out slowly and completely, so that your stomach flattens. Repeat 10 times.



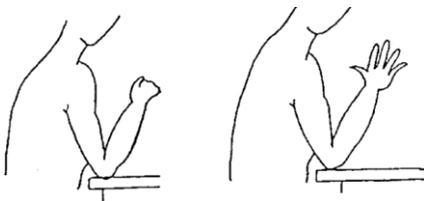
2. Lie flat on bed. Clasp hands together. Lift arms straight up as far as they will comfortably go. Repeat 10 times.



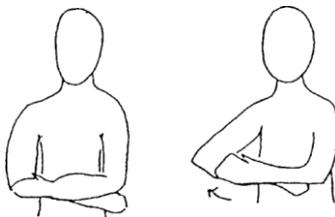
3. 'Pumping Action.' Slowly bend and straighten the elbow. Repeat 10 times.



4. 'Pumping Action.' Slowly make a fist, and then straighten fingers. Repeat 10 times.



5. Support affected arm with the other one. Gently push affected arm away from side as far as is comfortable, then return gently to side. Repeat 10 times.



Other therapies provided by Cancerkin

As a patient registered with Cancerkin you are entitled to **4 free sessions** of each of our one to one therapies **and unlimited sessions** of our group therapies:

One to one therapies

Massage (two kinds)

Reflexology

Spiritual healing

Acupuncture

Art Therapy

Reiki

Alexander technique

Group therapies

Patient Support Group (last Tuesday of each month)

Nia Technique (every Wednesday)

Young Women's Support Group

Patients Focus Group (to discuss or be part of new research at the Royal Free Hospital)

Tai Chi

Pilates (every Thursday)

Yoga (every Friday)

Look Good Feel Better (by appointment)

Contact us

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The Cancerkin Centre is open weekdays 9am-5pm.