

Swelling – lymphoedema

This information is about swelling caused by lymphoedema. Lymphoedema develops because of a build-up of lymph fluid in the body's tissues. It happens when the [lymphatic system](#) is not working properly. It can happen anywhere in the body.

If you have lymphoedema, you should be referred to a lymphoedema specialist. They will talk to you about treatment. You usually have more than 1 type of treatment, because they work better when used together. The main treatments for lymphoedema are:

- [skin care](#)
- [exercise and keeping active](#)
- [positioning of the limb or area](#)
- [compression](#) (usually with a compression garment)
- a type of massage called [lymphatic drainage](#).

It is important to look after and protect your skin to avoid any injury or infection.

Lymphatic drainage is a specialised medical massage. There are 2 main types:

- manual lymphatic drainage (MLD), by a trained therapist
- simple lymphatic drainage (SLD), which a therapist can teach you to do yourself.

You should not have other types of massage on the affected area.

Tips for managing lymphoedema

- Careful positioning when resting or sitting can reduce swelling in an arm, leg, or the head and neck. Your specialist can show you what is right for you.
- If you have not done exercise for a while, it is best to start slowly and build up. Always ask your lymphoedema specialist for advice.
- You may be fitted with a compression garment. It is important to wear this all day. You can usually take it off at night, when you are lying down and resting.
- Keep your skin clean in the affected area. Wash with warm water every day. If you have dry skin, use soap-free cleansers.
- After washing, carefully dry the area. If the lymphoedema is in a limb, make sure you dry in between the fingers or toes of the affected limb.
- Moisturise every day. Make sure the last stroke is downwards (in the direction of hair growth). This stops the moisturiser blocking hair follicles (folliculitis).
- Some household tasks can increase your risk of injuring your skin. These include washing up, DIY, gardening or cooking. Depending on where the lymphoedema is, you could wear long sleeves, gloves or long trousers to help reduce this risk.
- Use a good insect repellent to help prevent insect bites. Look for a repellent with at least 50% DEET. This is the active ingredient in insect repellent. Your pharmacist can give you advice.
- Sunburn can cause dryness and blistering. Wear clothes that cover the affected area in the sun. Use a suncream with a sun-protection factor (SPF) of 50. You should not use sunbeds.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our [website](#), including audiobooks. Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on orders.macmillan.org.uk such as:

- MAC11651 [Understanding lymphoedema](#)

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line on **0808 808 00 00**.

Further Macmillan support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Or visit macmillan.org.uk to [chat online](#) to one of our team.

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using Relay UK on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the [Relay UK app](#). Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

If you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#). Our free [Macmillan Buddy service](#) can arrange weekly calls with a friendly volunteer who understands what you're going through.

Other useful contact details

- The Lymphoedema Support Network – visit www.lymphoedema.org or call **0207 351 4480**
- British Lymphology Society – visit www.thebls.com
- Manual Lymphatic Drainage UK – visit www.mlduk.org.uk or call **0844 800 1988**

Notes and questions
