

# Lymphoedema of the arm



Information for Patients



# What is Lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is swelling (oedema) in the tissues, due to a build up of fluid and waste products. This build up occurs when:

- you are born with an abnormal lymph drainage system  
- this is known as Primary Lymphoedema
- lymph vessels, or nodes are damaged or removed due to cancer or its treatments, e.g. surgery and radiotherapy  
- this is known as Secondary Lymphoedema

At ACCORD Hospice we are only able to see patients who have Secondary Lymphoedema.

Once the lymph glands have been damaged or removed, fluid can gather in the arm, causing it to feel heavy and tight. Movement may be restricted too.

Lymphoedema can develop immediately after surgery or radiotherapy, but may also appear months, even years later.

## What Treatment is Available?

Treatment is based on individual needs. There are two phases of treatment:

- **Maintenance Treatment**  
This is for mild, uncomplicated lymphoedema. It involves skin care, massage, exercise, the use of compression garments and continually monitoring progress.
- **Intensive Treatment**  
This may be needed when the swelling is severe or complicated. It also involves advice on skin care, massage, exercise and specialised bandaging. Again progress is monitored.

## Skin Care

Taking care of your skin and careful use of your arm will help to prevent infections and inflammations. An infection can cause the arm to become more swollen, painful, hot, red and generally makes you feel unwell.

### Daily Care

Looking after your skin daily is very important.

- Dry your skin thoroughly and check all the skin as you do so.
- Apply cream or moisturiser to avoid dry skin. E45 or Diprobase is available on prescription from your GP. Start at the top of the arm and work your way down towards your hand. When applying the cream use gentle upward strokes.

### General Care

- Treat cuts and scratches immediately, by cleaning and using an antiseptic. Cover until healed.
- Take care when manicuring nails. Don't cut cuticles.
- Protect your affected arm from the sun, using a high factor sun cream or block, or wear long sleeved clothing.
- Use an insect repellent when at risk, e.g. in the garden or on holiday.
- Avoid being scratched or bitten by animals.
- Wear appropriate gloves when gardening, doing housework or handling hot food ('gauntlet' oven gloves are best).
- Use an electric razor or cream for removing underarm hair.

## Some Don'ts

With your affected arm do not :

-  allow injections to be given
  -  allow your blood to be taken
  -  allow your blood pressure to be taken
  -  wear tight clothing or jewellery
  -  take very hot baths or showers and avoid sauna baths
  -  carry heavy weights or shopping
  -  use heat or ice packs and avoid hot water bottles
  -  receive acupuncture
-  If you develop an infection, ask your GP for a course of antibiotics at the first signs: redness, increased swelling, tenderness, heat and generally feeling unwell. It is important to start the medicines as soon as possible and complete the course.

## Simple Lymphatic Drainage

This is a special form of gentle self-massage. It is designed to stimulate the lymph vessels, making them work harder to move fluid to other parts of the body, where it can be drained more effectively. The direction of the massage is therefore towards your **unaffected** armpit.

- The massage should be done daily for about 15 minutes.
- It should be very gentle and not cause redness of the skin.
- It should be done directly on the skin and no creams or lotions should be used.
- It will be more effective when you wear your sleeve at the same time.

The technique involves massage to the chest rather than the swollen arm itself, as by clearing the way ahead (i.e. removing the fluid from the part of the body next to the swollen arm) the arm itself has a better chance of draining.

This sort of massage is very slow and gentle, with the pressure being enough to cause the skin under your hand to move slightly.

If your hand slides over the skin, you are not going firmly enough.

If your skin becomes reddened, then you are going too firmly.

# Daily Lymph Drainage Exercises - do lying down



## Step 1

Place both hands either side of your neck, just below your ears. Using the flats of your fingers make a slow circling movement at this site. Keep your hand in contact with the skin whilst you are moving in a downwards direction and release as you move up. Do this 5 times.

## Step 2

Move both hands a little lower down the neck. Repeat the 5 slow circling movements, once again keeping your hands in contact with the skin whilst you are moving in a downwards direction and releasing as you move up.



## Step 3

Place two fingertips of each your hands in the hollows above your collar bones. Once again repeat the 5 slow circling movements.

**Repeat Steps 1 to 3 twice more.  
The above should take about  
2 minutes to complete**



## Step 4

Place the hand of your unaffected arm behind your head. Using the flat of your other hand, massage the lymph glands under the arm using a slow circular motion. Do this 20 times. This should take about 1 minute.



### **Step 5**

With the flat of either hand and using a gentle, stroking movement, massage fluid across your chest towards the armpit of your unaffected side. Start the massage next to the unaffected armpit. Then treat the middle of your chest and lastly the area near your swollen arm. Do this for 5 minutes. If you get tired, rest a little before continuing.

**Repeat Steps 1 to 3 twice more.**

**Remember, the direction of massage is towards your unaffected armpit**



### **Step 6**

Finish by doing the following breathing exercises which help to clear the deep lymphatic system.

Place both hands on your abdomen with the fingers overlapping. Breathe in slowly and deeply. Feel your abdomen rise upwards as you breathe. Hold for a slow count of 2. Then breathe out slowly and at the same time press your hands down firmly on your abdomen. Hold for a slow count of 2 and then relax.

Repeat the above 4 more times.  
Then relax for a couple of minutes before getting up.

## Compression Hosiery (Garments)

Compression garments are used to prevent further swelling by helping lymph drain away from the swollen arm. They must be properly measured and fitted. Our staff will do this for you.

- Garments e.g. sleeves, should be worn during the day and removed at night, unless your therapist suggests otherwise.
- You will find it easier and more beneficial to apply your sleeve first thing in the morning.
- The sleeve should fit snugly and smoothly. There should be no creases or wrinkles and it must never be folded over at the top.
- Wearing a rubber glove on the unaffected hand will make it easier to pull the sleeve on.
- Remove the sleeve and contact us if you experience:
  - pins and needles
  - pain
  - your fingers go white, blue or cold
- The sleeve should always be worn when carrying out exercise or massage.
- Hand wash the sleeve in warm soapy water and allow it to dry naturally. Never place over direct heat.
- Do not cut your sleeve.

## How to Apply the Sleeve

**Place a rubber glove on the hand you use to put on the sleeve - this will make it easier to go on.**

1. Turn the sleeve back on itself (Figure 1) so that the hand and/or lower arm part is hidden inside the sleeve.



**Figure 1**

2. Push your hand down through the top opening as in Figure 2, and ease the sleeve up the arm until the hand is in the right position.



**Figure 2**

3. Now grasp a firm support (Figure 3) so that you can gradually work the rest of the sleeve up your arm and into the right position. Move your arm through different positions, to ensure that you can move comfortably in the sleeve.



**Figure 3**

## Exercises

Exercise plays a very important part in controlling and treating Lymphoedema.

When you contract your muscles they squeeze and relax, helping to pump the fluid away. This effect is increased when wearing the sleeve as it squeezes from the outside. Exercise will help prevent stiffening of the joints and muscle weakness.

Do the following exercises daily, about 5 times each, slowly, rhythmically, with a short rest between each exercise. Avoid over exertion, weights, strains or vigorous exercise you are not used to.

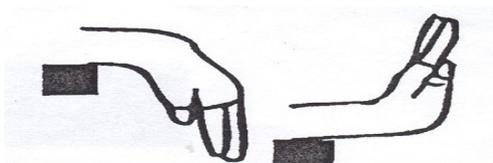
Always wear your sleeve during exercise. Swimming or exercise in water is excellent. Remember the potential risk of using public swimming baths i.e. infection and the effect of chlorine on the skin - (save old sleeves for swimming).

### 1. Bending and Stretching Fingers

You may find it is helpful to do this exercise with a sponge ball or ball of wool in your hand.

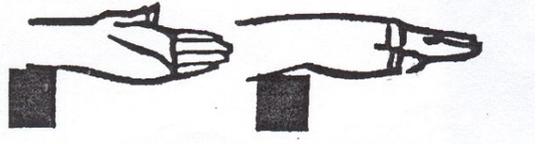


### 2. Bending and Stretching the hand back at the wrist



### 3. Palm Turns

Turn the palm of your hand to face the ceiling, then turn it to the floor.

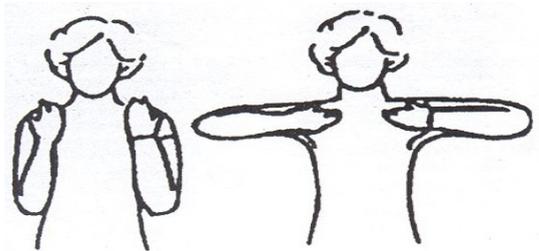


### 4. Bending and Stretching the Arm at the Elbow



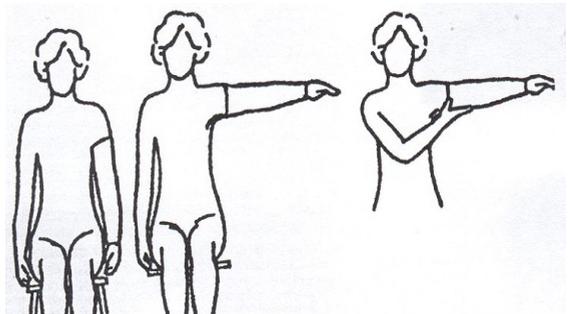
### 5. Arms and Shoulders

Bend both arms so that your hands rest on your shoulders. Lift the elbows out to the side, then back.



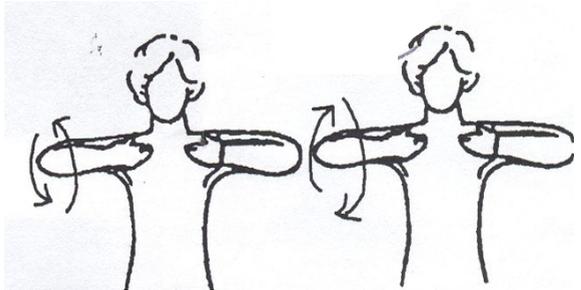
### 6. Arms to side

Lift your straight arm out to the side. If it is very stiff at the shoulder, support it with the other hand under the elbow.



## 7. Arms to Shoulders

Bend both arms so your hands rest on your shoulders. Now make circles in the air with your elbows - first in one direction, then in the other



## 8. Arms Above Head

If you have problems lifting your arm above your head, try to 'walk' your fingers up the wall, each time trying to go a little higher. Use your other arm to help raise your affected arm, by holding hands and lifting both arms together

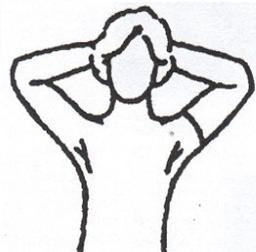


## 9. Head to Back

Now put both your hands on top of your head

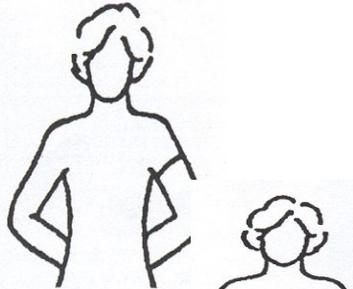


Then put both hands behind your head and push your elbows back



## 9. Head to Back contd.

Now put your hands behind your back. Rub your back with your hands.



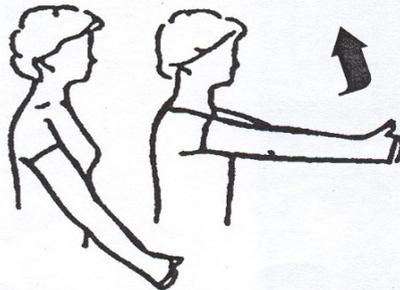
Then put your hands back on your knees.

If your shoulder is stiff do these exercises to the limit of your movement



## 10. Hand Clasp

Slowly bring your arms above your head. Hold for the count of 5 then gently lower them.



## 11. Posture Correction

Correct your posture using a mirror to make sure your shoulders are level and your head is upright (not tilted).



## General Advice

- Try to use your arm as normally as possible.
- If you are overweight, this will make your Lymphoedema worse.
- Some people find that spicy foods and alcohol can make the swelling worse.
- Drink plenty fluids, especially water, fruit juices or herbal teas.
- Avoid narrow bra straps and tight waist bands. Bras with deep sides and wide shoulder straps are most suitable.
- Carry your shoulder bag or handbag on the unaffected side.
- Use a shopping trolley and divide the load between lots of bags. Don't carry heavy weights on the affected side.
- Tight cuffs or jewellery will cause an increase in swelling.

## The Lymphoedema Team

For further advice or information, please contact a member of the Lymphoedema Team:

**Geraldine Bisland** - **Lymphoedema Practitioner**

Supported by

**Ailsa Currie** - **Senior Physiotherapist**

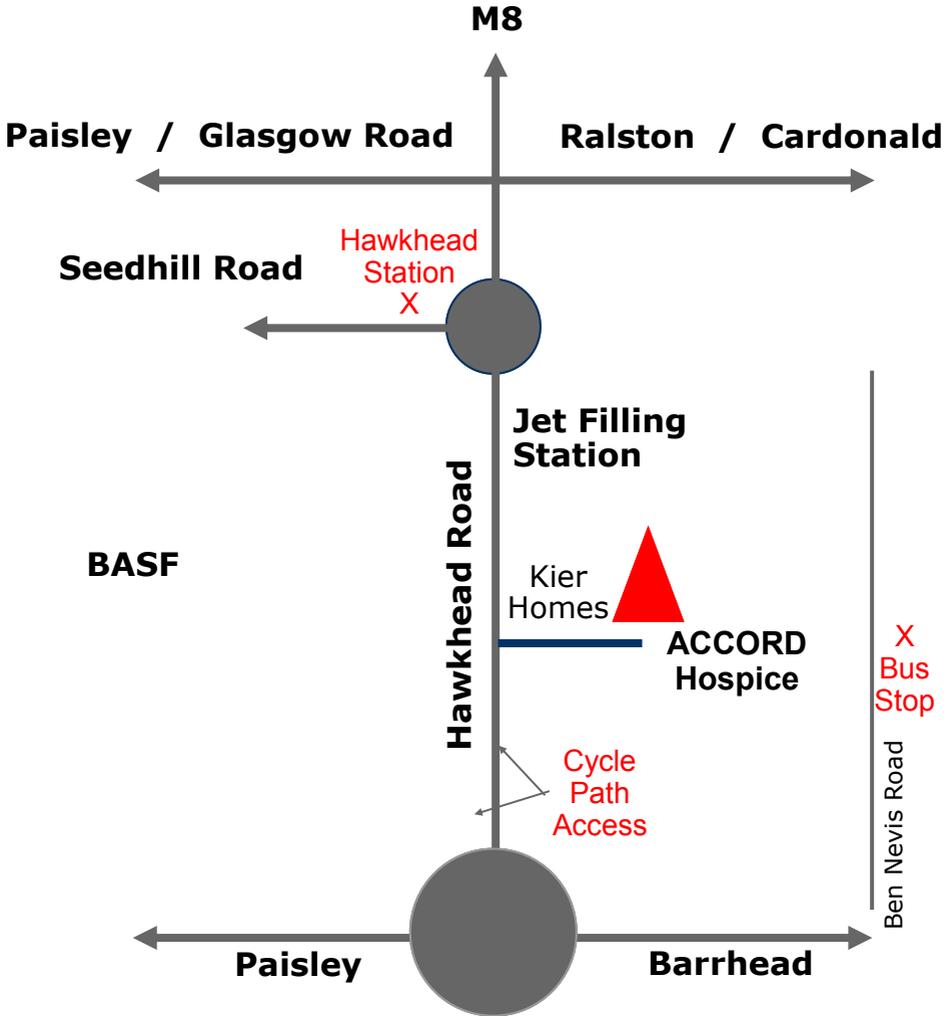
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## Participation

We value our patients and families participation in developing the services we provide, listening to what you have to say and taking the appropriate action as required.

If you wish to participate please visit the participation section within our website [www.accordhospice.org.uk](http://www.accordhospice.org.uk)

If you do not have access to the internet please request a leaflet.

## Suggestions, Comments & Complaints

If you have any suggestions, comments or complaints about how the service can be improved, please speak to Geraldine Bisland.

If you are not satisfied with the response, please discuss your concerns directly with the Chief Executive at ACCORD Hospice:

Jacki Smart  
0141 581 2000

Should you feel that your complaint has not been resolved by ACCORD Hospice, you may contact Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) directly, at any stage:

Healthcare Improvement Scotland	
Edinburgh Office:	Glasgow Office:
Gyle Square	Delta House
1 South Gyle Crescent	50 West Nile Street
EDINBURGH	GLASGOW G1 2NP
EH12 9EB	
0131 623 4300	0141 225 6999

[www.healthcareimprovementscotland.org](http://www.healthcareimprovementscotland.org)

If required this leaflet is available in other languages & formats

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