

# Lymphoedema of the leg



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 leg/s, causing them 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 leg will help to prevent infections and inflammations. An infection can cause the leg 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, particularly between the toes.
- Apply cream or moisturiser to avoid dry skin. E45 or Diprobase is available on prescription from your GP. Start at the top of the leg and work your way down towards your foot. When applying the cream use gentle upward strokes.

### General Care

- Treat cuts and scratches immediately, by cleaning and using an antiseptic. Cover until healed.
- Fungal infections (athletes foot) should be treated with appropriate cream from your GP
- Take care when cutting toenails. Consult a chiropodist if you have any difficulty.
- Protect your affected leg from the sun, using a high factor sun cream or block, or wear long trousers.
- Use an insect repellent when at risk, e.g. in the garden or on holiday.
- Avoid being scratched or bitten by animals.
- Wear wellingtons or firm boots for gardening.
- Use an electric razor or cream for removing leg hair.

## Some Don'ts

With your affected leg do not :



allow injections to be given



allow your blood to be taken



wear tight shoes with high heels or a low cut front



wear tight underwear or socks or stockings with a tight band around the top

take very hot baths or showers and avoid sauna baths



walk with bare feet indoors or outdoors



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 armpits.

- 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.

The technique involves massage to the trunk rather than the swollen leg itself, as by clearing the way ahead (i.e. removing the fluid from the part of the body next to the swollen leg) the leg 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 you 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.

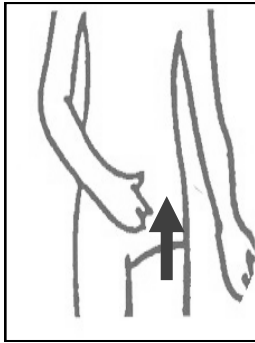
**Repeat Steps 1 to 3 twice more.  
The above should take about  
2 minutes to complete**



## Step 4

Place one hand 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.

Lower your arm and repeat this with your other hand behind your head.



### Step 5

With the flat of either hand and using a gentle, stroking movement, massage fluid up from your lower abdomen towards the glands under your arm.

Start the massage next to your armpit, then treat your abdomen and lastly the area at the top of your leg. Remember the direction of massage is towards your armpit. Do one side of your body first and then the other. You should spend 5 -10 minutes doing this. If you get tired, rest a little before continuing.



### 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 leg. They must be properly measured and fitted. Our staff will do this for you.

- Garments e.g. stockings, 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 stocking first thing in the morning.
- The stocking should fit snugly and smoothly. There should be no creases or wrinkles and it must never be folded over at the top.
- Wearing rubber gloves will make it easier to pull the stocking on.
- Remove the stocking and contact us if you experience:
  - pins and needles
  - pain
  - your toes go white, blue or cold
- The stocking should always be worn when carrying out exercise.
- Hand wash the stocking in warm soapy water and allow it to dry naturally. Never place over direct heat.
- Do not cut your stocking.



## How to Apply the Stocking

**Wear rubber gloves when applying the stocking  
- this will make it easier to go on.**

1. Turn the stocking back on itself (Figure 1) so that the foot and lower leg part is hidden inside the stocking.



**Figure 1**

2. If you have been supplied with a silk slipper, place this on the foot.



**Figure 2**

3. Push your foot down through the top opening (Figure 3) and ease the stocking up the leg until the heel is in the right position.



**Figure 3**

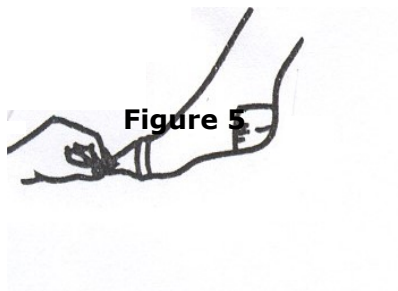
4. Now gradually work the rest of the stocking up your leg into the right position.

Move your leg through different positions to ensure that you can move comfortably in the stocking.



**Figure 4**

5. If a silk slipper was used this should now be pulled off through the toe opening.



**Figure 5**

## 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 stocking as it squeezes from the outside.

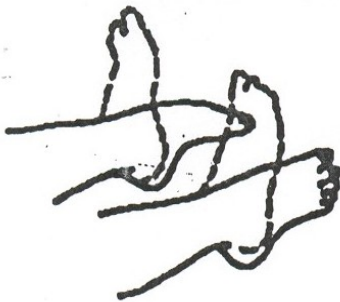
Exercise will help prevent stiffening of the joints and muscle weakness.

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 stocking 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.

### Lying on your back or sitting



Bend and straighten your ankles briskly.

If you keep your knees straight during the exercise you will stretch your calf muscles.

Lying on your back or sitting, legs supported



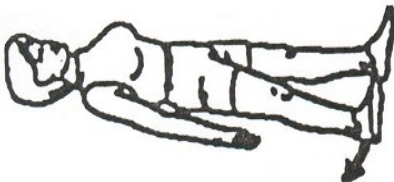
Bend and straighten your leg.

Sitting, legs supported



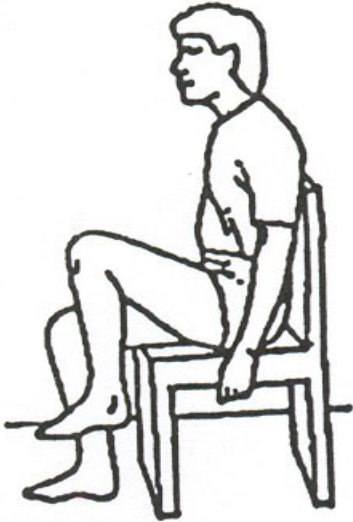
Brace your knee, pull toes up towards you and lift your heel half an inch off the ground.

Lying on your back or sitting, legs supported



Bring your leg out to the side and then back to the mid position.

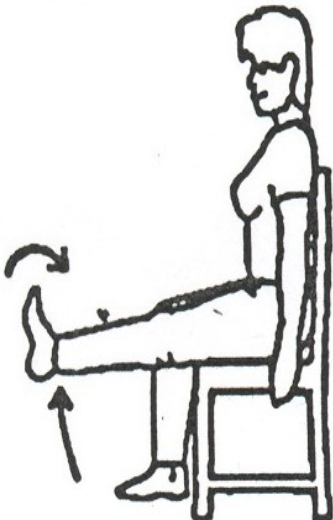
## Sitting on a chair



Lift your leg up off the seat keeping the knee bent.

Return to the starting position.

## Sitting on a chair



Pull your toes up, tighten your thigh muscle and straighten your knee.

Hold for approximately 5 seconds and slowly relax your leg.

## General Advice

- Try to use your leg as normally as possible.
- Standing for long periods of time is best avoided.
- Elevate your leg on a footstool when sitting.
- 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 tight underpants or waistbands, high-heeled or low cut shoes and socks with a tight band at the top.
- Wear cotton or natural fibres.
- Always wear your stocking when travelling especially by air and exercise your leg and foot regularly during the journey.

## The Lymphoedema Team

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

**Geraldine Bisland - Lymphoedema Practitioner**

Supported by

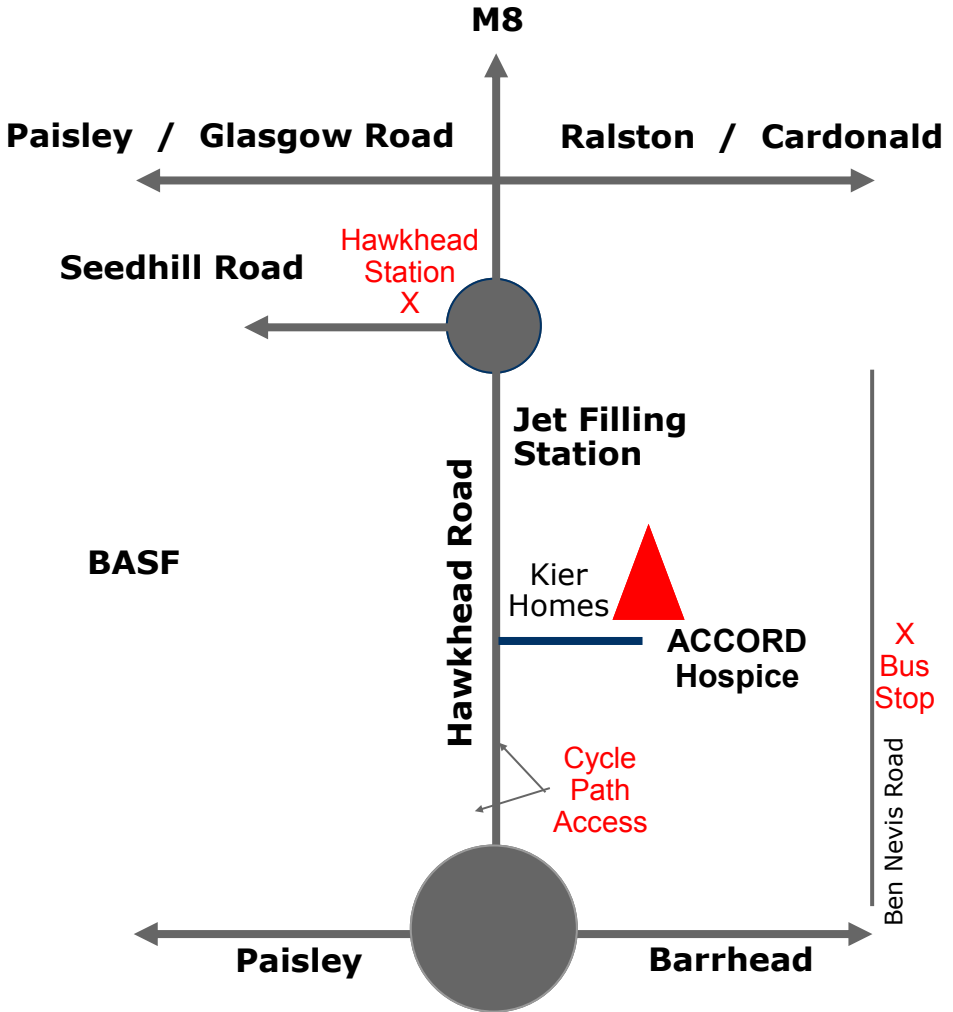
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## Participation

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 a member of staff.*

*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:*

*Edinburgh Office:  
Gyle Square  
1 South Gyle Crescent  
Edinburgh EH12 9EB  
0131 623 4300*

*Glasgow Office:  
Delta House  
50 West Nile Street  
Glasgow G1 2NP  
0141 225 6999*

*Email: [hcis.complaints@nhs.net](mailto:hcis.complaints@nhs.net)*

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

If required this leaflet is available in other languages & formats

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