

Primary lymphoedema is usually present from birth and may be due to underdevelopment of the lymphatic system (hereditary or congenital). It can affect infants or children and men and women at any age.

Secondary lymphoedema can occur in the treatment of cancer following surgery or radiotherapy. It can also occur as a result of infection, severe injury, burns or any other trauma, venous disease, immobility and filariasis.

Palliative

Most lymphoedema management in advanced cancer is palliative. However, this can be actively managed in most cases.

Lipoedema occurs almost exclusively in women and consists of bilateral and symmetrical enlargement of the legs and lower half of the body due to an abnormal deposit of fat.

Classification of severity of lymphoedema

The most useful indicator of unilateral limb swelling is percent excess volume (PCEV). **Grade 1 mild - PCEV less than 20 %**, **Grade 2 moderate - PCEV 20 to 40 %**, **Grade 3 severe - PCEV more than 40 %**. Clinical evidence of lymphoedema may be present in the absence of a measurable PCEV.

Prospect Hospice

President HRH The Duchess of Cornwall

Address Moormead Road Wroughton Swindon SN4 9BY

Tel 01793 813355

Email info@prospect-hospice.net

Web www.prospect-hospice.net

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Lymphoedema



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The lymphatic system

Lymph is a colourless fluid which forms in the body. It normally drains back into the blood circulation through a network of vessels and nodes, with lymph nodes acting as filter stations. They play an important part in the body's defence by removing excess protein, dead or abnormal cells and bacteria.

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a subcutaneous tissue swelling that develops when the lymphatic system can no longer transport lymph - a tissue fluid. This can be due to insufficiency (primary lymphoedema) or by damage caused by trauma (secondary lymphoedema).

The resulting pooling of water and protein in the tissues causes the swelling, which may cause chronic tissue inflammation and eventually leads to the formation of connective fibres.

Palliative care can be offered at any stage of an advanced or progressive illness – during the earlier management of the condition following diagnosis, through to when active treatment of the condition and its symptoms are no longer possible.

What can the lymphoedema service offer?

A full assessment and information on skin care, compression garments, exercise and massage.

Following assessment you may be provided with:

- Intensive treatment
- Maintenance programme
- Self-management programme

You will be seen at an outpatient clinic based at Prospect Hospice. In some circumstances you may be visited at home. The service is available from Monday to Friday.

How treatment can help

Early diagnosis and treatment are vital to control lymphoedema. The four cornerstones of treatment are skin care, compression garments, exercise and massage.

Skin care: Regular and careful skin care helps to keep the skin in good condition, as well as prevent the skin changes that can occur with lymphoedema and prevent infection (cellulitis, fungal infections).

Compression: Compression garments are made of a firm elasticated material and apply pressure to the skin while providing support to reduce the swelling. Garments should cover all the swollen area giving the strongest support distally so that fluid is pushed towards the centre of the body. Garments should also be comfortable to wear.

Exercise: Lymph flow depends on muscles working like a pump to encourage drainage and prevent pooling. Breathing exercises stimulate the deep lymphatics. Daily activities and exercises can maintain strength, range of movement and reduce swelling. It is important to wear the compression garment when doing activities and exercising.

Massage: Massage helps the lymph to move out of the swollen areas and into parts of the body where it can drain away normally. Massage can cover simple lymphatic drainage as well as manual lymphatic drainage - often used as a more intensive treatment programme.

Taking control

The most important part of treatment is to have information about ways to control lymphoedema, including:

- A diagnosis
- Knowledge about the lymph system
- An understanding of the treatment and benefits
- What will help and what will make things worse

For further information about our service, call 01793 816164.