



Management of Breast Lymphoedema

Lymphoedema (swelling lasting more than 3 months) of the breast can happen when the lymphatic system in this part of the body is not working properly. This leaflet provides specific information and guidance about managing your lymphoedema in the breast region.

Lymphoedema of the Breast

Lymphoedema of the breast can be caused by various factors including breast cancer surgery, metastases, radiotherapy to the breast, trauma, infection, and hormone fluctuations (pregnancy or labour). An indication of lymphoedema being present in the breast include:

- Bra leaving marks on the skin surrounding the breast which is not present on the unaffected side;
- Feeling of fullness, heaviness and tightness in the breast;
- Pain, discomfort or ache;
- Pitting (indentation mark left on skin if pressed).

Progression of Breast Lymphoedema

An indication of lymphoedema progressing in the breast includes:

- The volume (size) of the breast increases;
- The breast starts to change shape (distortion);
- Skin changes of the breast including fibrosis (hardening of the breast tissue) resembling Peau de orange (orange skin peel);
- Lymphorrhoea (leaking of fluid from the breast tissue).

Lymphoedema Management Plan:

1. Weight Management

Gaining weight or being overweight **is the main risk factor in developing lymphoedema**. It is important to follow a good healthy diet. If you are unsure what a 'normal' weight for you should be, ask a health care professional or look at some NHS websites. You can also ask your GP to refer to specialists for nutrition and dietary advice. *Listed below are websites suggested by dietitians within the NHS:*

- <https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/lose-weight/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/>
- <https://keepingmewell.com/>
- <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/weight-loss.html>
- <https://healthyweight.wales/>

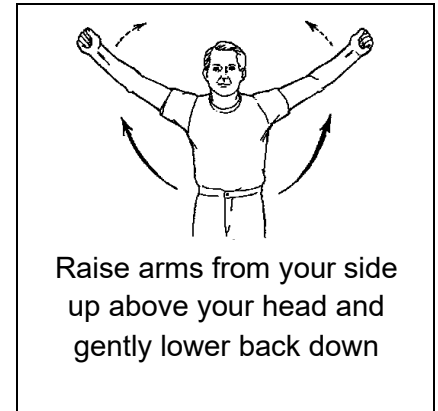
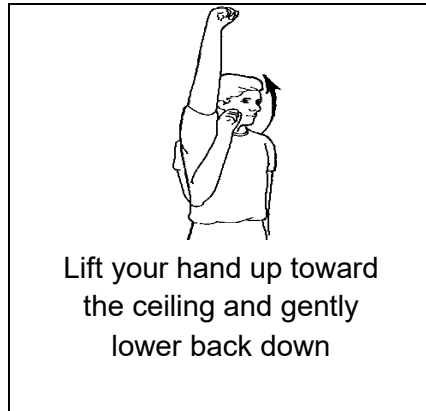
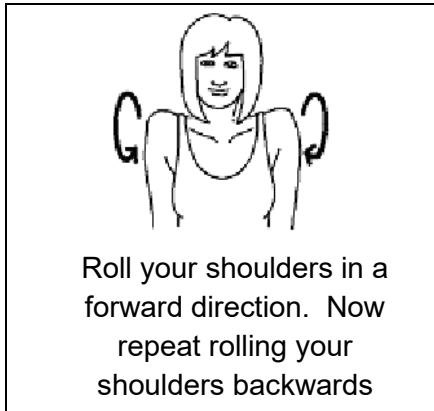


2. Skin Care

It is important to look after your skin to reduce the risk of infections like cellulitis. Wash and dry the area around the breast thoroughly. This is especially important under the breasts as the skin folds can be prone to infection. Using a non-perfumed moisturiser can help keep your skin intact and prevent any cracks or skin dryness.

3. Movement & Exercise

Gentle movement, exercise and activities will help the muscles pump lymph fluid more effectively through your body. It does not matter where your lymphoedema is, movement is important for everyone. Movement helps you improve and maintain flexibility and keeps your bones strong. Being active can help you achieve and maintain a healthy weight and may improve your emotional wellbeing. Maintaining a good posture is also important, because a poor, stooped posture can increase muscle tension and restrict drainage of fluid.

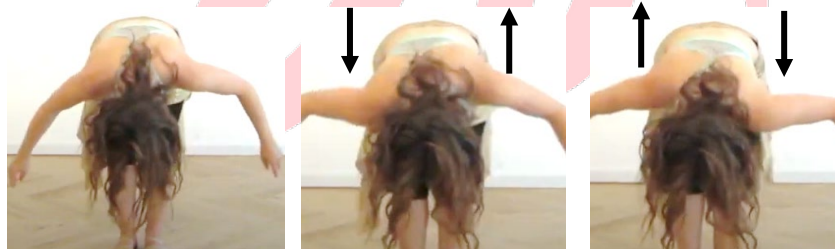


Continue to perform arm and neck exercises as previously advised by your breast care nurse and the exercises listed below:

- Clasp hands together, elbows pointing out to the sides. Push palms together, hold for 10 seconds and release. Repeat 5 times. Perform 3 times a day.



- Chest shimmy – lean forward so that the weight of your breasts are hanging under your chest. Shake your shoulders and chest to get the breasts moving. The weight and shaking of the breasts will loosen up the fluid within the breasts and help drain more easily when you put your bra / support vest back on.



4. Compression

It is important to wear a bra that fits you well and that provides a full cup with firm support. This will help lift the breast and reduce the build-up of fluid. Foam inserts or padding may be provided to help soften firm and stubborn breast oedema. There are compression garments that can help you if the build-up of fluid is not resolved with wearing bra. Below we provide some tips on checking the fit of your bra.

Checking the Correct Fit of your Bra

- The under band provides the main support. This band should fit comfortably around your back with just enough room for two fingers to fit under it when fastened. Try to ensure it is at the same level all the way around. The band should NOT ride up;
- Wide straps and deeper/wider side wings can offer extra support. Be aware that bra straps should not cut into the skin or slide down. Avoid over tightening straps to provide support, remember it is the under band that gives the majority of support;

- Breasts should fit into the cups. If you can, stretch your arms up into the air: If your cups ride up or breasts slip out try a smaller “back” size. If you look down and see the breast spilling out the cup is too small. If the cup is too big the cup fabric will wrinkle;
- There are areas of your bra that should fit flat against your body and ribcage. These include the under band and side support as well as the centre front that sits between the breasts;
- When you try a bra on, pop a good fitting T-shirt over the top and look out for wrinkles, puckering, lumps and bumps;
- Remember to check your side view. Breasts should sit midway between your shoulders and elbows;
- If you are able, it is important to get measured regularly (annually if possible), particularly after any treatment or significant weight changes;
- Care for your bra as per the manufacturer’s guidance. Remember washing will loosen the fabrics so go tighter on the “hook and eye” when choosing your bra to get more wear. Try and replace your bra if you find it no longer fits well;
- It is worth noting you will not be the same size everywhere so always try before you buy. It is not about what is on the label but more about what fits you the best.

Is there anything else I can do?

Yes, here are some other advice that can help:

- You might want to consider wearing a sleep/soft cup bra overnight to support the breast to prevent further fluid build-up;
- If you wear a prosthesis, use the guidance above to ensure you are supporting the natural breast.

Where can I go to be fitted and try on bras?

Below we have listed some stockists that other patients have suggested. Some are nation-wide while others are local services in Wales. Most places will offer a free fitting service without the obligation of having to purchase.

Bellissima
LINGERIE
bellissimalingerie.co.uk

BRAVISSIMO
LEADERS IN BRAS AND BRA-SIZED
SWIMWEAR, MADE FOR D CUPS & UP
bravissimo.com

CAMILLE
camille.co.uk

COCOBELLA
LINGERIE & MORE
cocobella-lingerie.co.uk

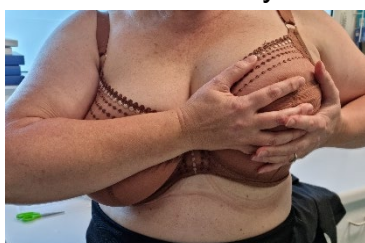
Madame Foner
madamefoner.co.uk

M&S
marksandspencer.com

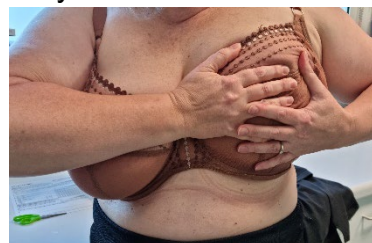
PRETTY LOVELY
LINGERIE BOUTIQUE
prettylovely.co.uk

5. Massage

Self-Massage is performed by yourself (or carer/family member) and is an integral part of the self-management of breast lymphoedema. The aim of this massage is to help move fluid off the breast. A simple technique to try is lifting and squeezing the breast, holding the squeeze for a count of 10. Repeat this five times. This can be performed regularly throughout the day. If you find this difficult to do, you can work towards this by starting gently and slowly.



Lift the breast



Squeeze the breast

If your healthcare professional identifies the need for a specialised massage technique called Manual Lymphatic Drainage (MLD), this will be discussed with you at your clinical appointment. There are additional techniques that can also be discussed with your healthcare professional. Otherwise, have a look at a simplified version of MLD by following the QR codes below.

6. Other Options

Kinesiotape

This is an elastic adhesive tape that you may be taught to apply to the affected area if your therapist feels this may help your breast oedema. It is used to encourage lymphatic drainage/flow.



Electrotherapy

Healthcare professionals are able to use different forms of equipment to help soften and reduce breast oedema when indicated.

Other resources available from Lymphoedema Wales

We also have a range of leaflets and videos on related topics that you might find helpful. Follow this link: <https://lwc.nhs.wales/patient-information/>

Please note that some of the links on this leaflet open a page on a third-party site and some content may not be available in Welsh.

Patient Story

Patricia was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a lumpectomy, complete axillary node clearance and radiotherapy. During her radiotherapy, Patricia felt her breast was heavy and swollen, but due to the soreness of her skin, Patricia did not touch her skin or wear a bra. After eight weeks, Patricia felt her breast was twice the size, it was hard and she had dimpling appearance on her breast. Patricia went to see her breast care nurse who contacted the lymphoedema service straight away for management of her breast swelling.

What happened at the lymphoedema appointment? *Patricia was assessed to understand how severe her breast oedema was, check her mobility and flexibility, especially of her shoulders and chest, as tight muscles will make draining of lymphoedema more difficult. Patricia was advised how to look after her skin, and was encouraged to recommence the exercises she was given after her breast surgery to help improve her flexibility and muscle strength. She was taught how to massage her breast to get the fluid to soften and drain again. This was helped by advising Patricia on the need for a good fitting, firm support bra to lift and hold the breast, thus making it more difficult for fluid to build up during the day.*

Where is Patricia now? *Patricia manages her swelling by wearing her well fitted bra every day and performs her skin care and self-massage daily. Patricia has returned back to yoga and swimming, which she finds relaxing and helps with weight management alongside healthy eating.*

Follow the link or QR code to view a short video: www.medic.video/w-lymph

