

## What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a swelling caused by a build-up of fluid in the tissues under the skin. Some treatments for sarcoma, such as radiotherapy and surgery, can damage the lymphatic system and cause lymphoedema.

## The lymphatic system:

- Drains excess fluid from body tissues into the blood circulation
- Contains white blood cells called lymphocytes. These are carried in the lymph fluid and fight infection
- Gets rid of waste products produced by cells

## Signs and symptoms

The most common symptom of lymphoedema is a swelling in the arm or leg caused by a build-up of fluid under the skin.

Other symptoms to look out for include:

- A feeling of heaviness or tightness
- Restricted range of movement
- Aching or discomfort
- Recurring infections
- Hardening and thickening of the skin, called fibrosis

Lymphoedema does not appear directly after treatment so you may not develop symptoms for several weeks, months or even years after your treatment for sarcoma.

## What do I do if I show signs of lymphoedema?

It is normal to have swelling following surgery or radiotherapy as this is part of the healing process. However, if your swelling has not gone down within 6-8 weeks speak to your sarcoma clinical nurse specialist.

If you develop signs of lymphoedema you should get specialist advice as soon as possible. You can:

- Speak to your sarcoma clinical nurse specialist who will discuss your new symptoms with you.
- If you do not see your sarcoma clinical nurse specialist regularly, your GP can help you get specialist advice.
- Our Support Line can point you in the right direction. Contact us on 0808 801 0401 or [supportline@sarcoma.org.uk](mailto:supportline@sarcoma.org.uk)



**Sarcoma<sup>UK</sup>  
Support Line  
0808 801 0401**

**[supportline@sarcoma.org.uk](mailto:supportline@sarcoma.org.uk)**

## Got a question?

- **Our Support Line is confidential**
- **We believe no question is a silly question**
- **We lend a listening ear**
- **We can point you in the right direction**

**[sarcoma.org.uk/supportline](http://sarcoma.org.uk/supportline)**

## Prevention

Not everyone who has had treatment for sarcoma will develop lymphoedema. However, it is important to know if you are at risk so you can reduce your chances of developing the condition. There are a number of ways you can do this.

### Look after your skin

- Keep your skin clean and moisturise with a gentle moisturiser. Try to avoid perfumed lotion as they can dry the skin
- Avoid the midday sun, cover up and use sunscreen to avoid getting sunburnt
- Avoid, where possible, having an injection, such as a flu jab or holiday vaccination, in the area at risk of developing lymphoedema
- Avoid having blood taken from the area at risk
- Avoid getting a tattoo in any area at risk
- Avoid a blood pressure cuff being applied to the area at risk, which can cause skin trauma
- Use insect repellent to avoid insect bites which can cause skin trauma and are an infection risk
- Avoid cuts and scratches to the skin where possible to reduce the chances of infection which can cause lymphoedema
- Cleanse thoroughly and use antiseptic cream on any cuts and scratches to reduce the chance of infection
- Compression stockings can also be used to prevent lymphoedema

### Look out for risks of infection

Skin infections can damage your lymphatic system and cause lymphoedema in an area of the body that is at risk.

Signs of possible infection in an area at risk of lymphoedema can include:

- swelling and redness
- skin feeling hot
- discomfort and pain
- flu-like symptoms

If you have an infection in an area at risk of lymphoedema it is important to get treated quickly so that it does not damage the lymphatic system. Your GP can prescribe you with antibiotics to treat the infection.

### Keep active and exercise

Safe and effective exercise will encourage movement of lymph fluid through the lymphatic system. Muscle movements enhance lymph flow, reducing the risk of lymph fluid building up under the skin.

### Keep to a healthy weight

If you are overweight it can increase your risk of developing lymphoedema. Your GP, or sarcoma clinical nurse specialist can give you advice on how to maintain a balanced and healthy diet.

**Sarcoma UK is the only cancer charity in the UK focusing on all types of sarcoma.**



This factsheet has been produced by the Information and Support Team at Sarcoma UK. It has been reviewed by Sarcoma UK's Information Review Panel which includes healthcare professionals and people affected by sarcoma.

Sarcoma UK makes every reasonable effort to ensure that the information we provide is up-to-date, accurate and unbiased. We hope this factsheet adds to the medical advice you have received and helps you make informed decisions about your care and treatment. Please speak to a member of your care team if you are worried about any medical issues.