



# How to get your swollen limb under control

If you suffer from swelling (oedema) of your limbs, compression therapy can help. Sometimes, however, swelling can appear above or below your garment. Here we explain why this happens and what you need to do to get it under control.



If you have a condition that affects your ability to clear fluid from your tissues, such as lymphoedema or venous disease, you may experience swelling in the affected area.

Lymphoedema, for example, is a condition in which the lymphatic system doesn't work as it should. The lymphatic system is responsible for fluid balance in the body, and if it is not working properly

from birth (primary lymphoedema) or is damaged through surgery or trauma (secondary lymphoedema), it can cause swelling in the affected area and/or limb(s). Swelling may also occur if you have a venous leg ulcer. This is because this type of ulcer is caused when the valves inside the affected veins don't work properly. Normally, these valves stop the blood from flowing backwards. If they are damaged, however, blood can



pool in the lower limb instead of going back to the heart. When this happens, fluid can build up in the tissues, leading to oedema. Whether swelling is a result of lymphoedema or venous insufficiency, or a combination of both, the underlying cause must be addressed, otherwise the oedema can become chronic (known as chronic oedema). At this stage, without treatment the swelling can increase, and as fluid accumulates in the tissues over time it can lead to inflammation and skin changes, including ulceration.

The good news is that the sooner you spot the swelling and seek help to minimise it, the better your limb health will be.

### **Remember that prevention is better than a cure!**

If your HCP tells you that you have known risk factors for the development of chronic oedema, or if you have begun to notice minor swelling at the end of the day that has gone by next morning, it may be worth starting to wear compression hosiery in order to prevent the oedema from getting worse. If you already have chronic oedema, it is never too late to seek help. Whatever you do, don't ignore your swelling — take action to get it under control.

### **Find out the cause of your swelling**

Other medical conditions, including heart failure or kidney disease, can also result in oedema, so always check with your HCP to identify or rule out an underlying medical cause before using compression therapy to make sure it is safe for you.

### **Compression therapy can help to keep your swelling under control**

Compression therapy is the main treatment to reduce swelling in limbs affected by chronic oedema. It helps by improving fluid drainage and pushing blood from the tissues back into the veins. To help reduce the swelling in your legs your HCP will have discussed the benefits of wearing compression and prescribed the most appropriate system to manage the underlying cause of your oedema. There are three main ways in which compression can be delivered — using bandages, wraps or hosiery.

There is a wide range of compression garments available which deliver different amounts of pressure (measured in millimetres of mercury [mmHg]). The amount of pressure delivered by a garment is known as its class. The pressure delivered needs to be strong enough to apply force to your limb to help remove the oedema from the tissues. Different lengths (e.g. below knee and thigh length) and sizes are also available and your garment should cover or 'contain' the area of swelling to be effective.

The strength and type of compression recommended to you by your HCP will be based on your clinical condition, and will consider the following factors:

- Is fluid leaking from your limbs and is the swelling severe? If so, you may need compression bandaging in the short term to get these symptoms under control. Higher pressure may be used at first to help keep fluid within the veins and out of the tissues to control



swelling effectively (usually over 40 mmHg is ideal). Your HCP will advise if this approach is needed for you and your condition. If using bandaging, once your oedema is reduced and fluid leakage improves, your HCP may recommend using a compression garment or wrap

- Is the swelling moderate to mild? If so, your HCP may start your treatment with a compression wrap or hosiery
- Can you manage your compression garment? Your dexterity, your preferences and ability to apply the garment by yourself should also be considered.

Most compression systems are applied from the base of the toes to just below the knee. However, if oedema affects the thighs, or if fluid is pushed out from above the garment to the knee or below it into the toes (this does happen sometimes when wearing compression), additional compression for the thigh and/or toes may be needed.

### Swelling in your toes

Toe swelling can sometimes happen in people with leg oedema, even when using a compression system. This is

because bandages, wraps, and open-toe compression stockings don't always cover the toes. As a result, fluid can get pushed down into the toes from the tissues below the compressed area. Toe swelling is often not recognised or treated by your HCP until a complication occurs such as fluid leakage, skin breakdown or infection. Early treatment of toe swelling with either toe bandaging or a toe cap is advised, to help prevent these complications and to make your feet feel more comfortable. Your HCP should be able to assist in selecting the correct type of toe compression for you.

### What is toe bandaging?

Toe bandaging is often used along with compression bandaging when there is toe swelling. It is seen as an effective way to help control oedema in the toes, however, training is required to do this properly, and your HCP may be unable to do it, depending on their level of skill and training. When applied correctly, toe bandaging should not affect your movement or cause any pain or discomfort. Toe bandaging is less commonly used with compression wraps or open-toe compression stockings because toe caps are usually preferred for these types of compression.

### What are compression toe caps?

Toe caps are garments for the toes that can be a good alternative to toe bandaging. They come in different compression classes, are made from a light, stretchy fabric, and are available on prescription as ready-made or made to measure. There are various

types available and your HCP will measure your toes as instructed by the manufacturer to ensure that you are fitted with the correct size.

### Swelling above the knee

If your condition means that you are experiencing swelling above the knee, your HCP may recommend thigh compression. Options to deliver compression to this area include:

- Thigh bandages. Your compression bandaging may be extended from your toes up to your thigh
- Thigh-length compression stockings. These are special hosiery (either stockings or tights) designed to apply pressure to your thigh
- Thigh compression wraps. These can be used to apply adjustable compression around the thigh.

You HCP will recommend the best approach for you.

### What can I do to help improve my leg swelling?

As well as making sure your compression fits properly and is delivering the right amount of pressure to effectively manage your oedema, there are small changes you can make generally that might make a difference to your limb health:

- Practice good skin care. Keep your skin clean by gently washing and drying and use unscented moisturizers to keep it soft and supple (see p.24–25)
- Stay as active as possible. Regular movement helps your compression garment to work more effectively to reduce swelling

- Follow a balanced diet. Eating well and maintaining a healthy weight can help to reduce swelling
- Avoid standing for long periods. This can prevent swelling from worsening
- Elevate your legs. Whenever you are sitting for a while, try to raise your legs to prevent fluid accumulating.

### When to act quickly

If you notice an increase in your usual swelling, or if you experience issues like fluid leakage, or skin breakdown despite using your compression as you should, it may be time for a new garment so make an appointment to be reassessed. If you experience sudden swelling accompanied by signs of infection (see below), contact your HCP urgently to get treatment with antibiotics.

Remember that any change in your overall health or life circumstances can impact on your oedema so regular check-ups are key to keep on top of your limb health. ➤

*Best Practice Statement (2019) Best Practice in the Community. Chronic Oedema. www.jcn.co.uk*

### Signs of infection

Seek urgent medical care if:

- You have increased or spreading redness affecting your leg
- New pain
- New swelling in your leg
- A fever and raised temperature
- Chills, sweating and muscle aches (flu-like symptoms)
- Nausea and vomiting.