



Signs and symptoms: how to nip them in the bud

Lymphoedema often develops slowly, getting worse over time if not treated. Understanding how the condition progresses can help you to recognise when to seek help; remember it is never too soon or too late to nip symptoms in the bud.

Early symptoms and mild oedema

Symptoms might occur before swelling becomes obvious in the affected limb. These can include:

- A feeling of heaviness or tightness
- Mild aching or discomfort
- Clothes, shoes, or jewellery feeling tighter than usual.

In the early stages, fluid doesn't drain away properly, and starts to build up in the tissues where it causes swelling. This may be noticeable at the end of the day or after standing for a long time. Usually, the skin over the affected area is soft, and if you press your finger into the swelling, it may leave a dent (this is known as pitting oedema). The swelling usually goes down overnight or after rest and/or elevation.

Moderate oedema

The swelling may progress to become more permanent and doesn't go down as easily, even with rest or elevation. As more fluid builds in the tissues, it causes swelling to increase, and the tissues to feel firmer. Skin changes can

occur, including:

- Thickening and hardening so the affected area feels 'woody' (known as fibrosis)
- Dryness or flaking
- Skin folds
- Frequent infections (such as infection of the skin, also known as cellulitis).

Severe oedema

With severe oedema, the swelling can lead to distortion to the usual limb shape. It may be much larger, with advanced skin changes. You may see:

- Dry or thickened skin (known as hyperkeratosis)
- Wart-like growths (papillomatosis)
- Open wounds or ulcers
- Leaking of lymph fluid through the skin (known as lymphorrhoea)
- More frequent and serious infections of the wound and skin.

Remember that at every stage, regular treatment can control symptoms and prevent them worsening. Read on to find out more about treatment phases (p.9). ➡