



# How the four parts of lymphoedema care fit together

There are four key parts to managing lymphoedema to get the best results in the long term. They work together to move fluid to reduce swelling, and improve your skin health and overall wellbeing. Read on to find out what they are!



If you have lymphoedema, your overall treatment (whatever phase you are in), will revolve around four key areas of care that have been proven to be effective.

These are:

1. Skin care
2. Exercise
3. Manual lymphatic drainage
4. Compression therapy.

These four components work together to help maximise the amount of excess

fluid that can be moved out of the tissues to reduce swelling, as well as improve your skin integrity and keep your condition stable. Taking an active role in your care in one or more of these areas, if you are willing and able, will benefit you. Being involved in your care can help you to feel in control, as we as decrease the impact of lymphoedema on your everyday life as your symptoms are more likely to be kept under control with your involvement.



A summary of how these areas can help is given below, but you can find out more about each of them in the rest of the magazine. Read on to learn more about each of these important areas and how they fit together like the pieces of a puzzle to help you to take control of your lymphoedema.

## 1. Skin care

Your skin is the largest organ in your body, and one of its most important jobs is to protect you from injury and infection. In people with lymphoedema that is not managed well, fluid can build up in the tissues over time leading to inflammation and skin changes, making it more fragile and more likely to breakdown. Once you have a break in the protective barrier that the skin provides, you are more vulnerable to skin infection (cellulitis) as this allows bacteria from outside into the body.

Keeping your skin healthy, clean, and well moisturised helps to reduce the risk of complications and protect your limb from further damage. The article on p 16 gives more detail on how to care for your skin. If you have a wound, find out how to look after it while it heals on p 26.

## 2. Exercise

Most people know that exercise is a good thing, but maybe don't appreciate that even a seemingly small amount can have positive benefits. Staying active in a way that's safe and manageable for you can make a big difference to your health and help manage your lymphoedema. By moving, the muscles of the body help to squeeze fluid in the veins and



tissues moving it back into the circulation. This effect is enhanced by wearing compression therapy.

As a result, even gentle activities like walking, swimming, or stretching can help. If you're unable to walk or stand, simple movements such as pointing your toes away from you and then back towards you can help activate your calf muscles and support better blood and lymph flow.

Try to avoid sitting or standing in the same position for long periods, as the effects of gravity and inaction of your leg muscles can cause fluid to pool. Elevating your legs, if possible, helps to get the fluid back up the legs. This is why putting your feet up when resting, and try to sleep in bed at night rather than in your chair can help to resolve swelling in the early stages.

## 3. Manual lymphatic drainage

Manual lymphatic drainage is a special type of gentle massage carried out by trained therapists. The aim is to move the fluid from swollen areas back into the lymphatic system, where it can be reabsorbed by the body.



Manual lymphatic drainage helps to:

- Reduce swelling
- Ease discomfort
- Improve movement
- Decrease the size of the limb.

As explained on p 14, manual lymphatic drainage may be used during intensive treatment phase. In the maintenance stage, you (or a carer) may be taught simple lymphatic drainage, similar massage techniques that you can do at home to help maintain the improvements.

#### 4. Compression therapy

Compression therapy is one of the most important parts of treating lymphoedema at every stage of treatment. In people at risk of developing lymphoedema, or those in the early stages, it is used to prevent swelling. In the intensive stages it is used to reduce the size of the limb and in the maintenance stage it is used to keep the limb in a stable condition.

Compression works by gently applying pressure to your limb, helping to move fluid out of the tissues and back into your circulation. It also works alongside your calf muscles to support healthy fluid movement.

The amount of compression pressure you have will be prescribed depending on your needs, but stronger compression is usually recommended for people with lymphoedema. The compression product you use should also contain all of the swollen area, and fit your limb snugly without being too big or small. At different stages of your condition you may need to change your compression product to best support you and your limb.

Compression therapy can be delivered using a wide range of different products, made from a variety of fabrics. It can be hard to know what is right for you and your healthcare professional should you to decide what is best and measure you for the product that is chosen. The different types of compression products available, including bandages, hosiery and wraps, are described in more detail on p 32.

These four parts of care largely focus on improving the physical condition of your limb but your mental and general wellness will also play a large part in your ability to live your best with lymphoedema. You can find out how to adapt to living with a long-term condition on p 38, and how to have a well-balanced diet on p 35 as part of your overall plan. ➡