

Lymph is a colourless fluid that forms in the tissues of the body. It normally drains back into the blood circulation through a network of vessels and nodes called the lymphatic system.

Oedema means swelling.

Lymphoedema is a swelling in the tissue below the skin caused by lymph fluid which cannot drain away. This can occur when the lymph vessels or nodes are damaged or blocked. Sometimes this can happen as a result of surgery or radiotherapy due to scar tissue formation.

You will have lymph nodes removed in your operation and there are some simple precautions you can take to avoid overloading your remaining lymph drainage routes:

- Take particular care of your skin to avoid developing an infection in your affected arm— use moisturising cream to prevent dryness. Try to avoid scratches and cuts and if they do occur, wash them thoroughly and apply a simple antiseptic. If the cut becomes sore or inflamed contact your family doctor as soon as possible.
- Whenever possible avoid having injections, blood samples or blood pressure measurements taken from the affected arm
- Wear gloves for doing jobs such as gardening, washing up or taking hot food out of the oven and use a thimble for sewing.
- Do not use razor blades for shaving your underarm, use an electric razor or depilatory cream.
- Take care when cutting nails and always use nail clippers.
- Use insect repellent cream to prevent bites and if an insect bite becomes infected please contact your family doctor.
- Take care in the sun, always use sun protection cream and take care not to burn.
- Remember to use your arm normally, movement helps the lymph drainage. However, do not lift or push heavy objects with the affected arm or wear clothing which may pinch or restrict your arm.

Always tell your doctor, breast care nurse or clinic nurse if you notice signs of persistent swelling in your arm or hand. It is easier to treat in the early stages and an appointment can be arranged with the breast care nurse, Lymphoedema specialist nurse or the Lymphoedema clinic for advice and treatment.

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