

About Lymphoedema

Background

Lymphoedema is swelling, caused by a failure of the lymphatic system to adequately drain fluid from part of the body. It is a long-term condition but can be well controlled with the correct care and attention. Swelling may affect the arm or leg/s and can also extend into the trunk of the body. Sometimes, it results in skin problems, reduced movement, discomfort and infection called cellulitis.

It is estimated that over 100,000 people in the UK may have lymphoedema. Studies have shown that some people with lymphoedema feel anxious, depressed or isolated. You may find it frustrating if no-one seems to know how to help you or treatment for lymphoedema is not available in your area. Although this is not a new problem, there are some areas in the UK without adequate lymphoedema services.

The Lymphatic System

Blood flows through the body to nourish the tissues and any excess fluid is removed by the lymphatic system to be returned to the blood circulation. There are many lymphatic channels and some, especially near the skin, are very small and delicate. As the channels go deeper into the body, the lymphatics become larger and drain through groups of lymph nodes (sometimes called glands). The lymphatic system has an important role in fighting infection.

The Role of The Lymphatic System

The lymphatic system is a one-way drainage system that removes fluid from the interstitial tissues and returns it to the vascular circulation through a network of lymphatic vessels and lymph nodes ('glands'). It helps in maintaining fluid balance, transports fats and proteins and has an important immunological function.

A vast network of initial lymphatics is present in the skin and connects to a series of pre-collector, deeper collector lymphatics and lymph nodes. There are over 700 lymph nodes in the body with many around the neck, under the arms and in the groin. The thoracic duct is the largest lymph vessel draining lymph from the lower body and left upper body into the blood circulation near the heart. The right upper body drains into the right lymphatic duct.

'Lymphotomes' or lymph territories are areas of the skin that drain into specific lymph node groups. If a group of lymph nodes is blocked or damaged, alternative drainage routes can be used to redirect lymph into neighbouring areas.

Movement of lymph is enhanced by:

- * Variations in tissue pressure due to local interstitial fluid, skin movement and massage, stimulate the thin walled initial lymphatics to open, allowing fluid to move into the lymphatic system
- * Natural contraction of the deeper lymphatics that have a muscular wall (valves in the larger lymphatic vessels encourage unidirectional flow)
- * Body movement that activates the 'muscle pump'
- * Pulsation of blood vessels adjacent to the lymphatics
- * Changes in intra-thoracic and intra-abdominal pressures when deep breathing.