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## Your guide to breast and chest wall swelling after breast cancer treatments

Issued by the Breast Team

This leaflet is to give you information on the treatment options available for breast and/or chest wall swelling. This swelling is very common following breast cancer treatments such as surgery and radiotherapy. Usually the swelling will settle over time but for some patients the swelling can take a long time to settle or in a small number of patients the swelling may be permanent.

## **Breast and chest wall swelling**

Following your surgery and radiotherapy it can be very common to experience breast and/or chest wall (truncal) swelling. This is caused by the treatment which can cause the lymphatic drainage vessels around this area to get congested and cause the breast, armpit area and chest wall to swell. This is referred to as oedema (swelling).

## **Signs and symptoms**

Some patients may notice a visible swelling of the area or the skin may appear pitted like orange peel. Sometimes the area can feel uncomfortable and be painful. Patients sometimes refer to the area feeling fuller. The swelling can cause your bra to make indentations on your skin. If the area is lightly pressed, it can feel as though there is fluid under the surface and the marks can take some time to disappear.

The swelling will usually disappear overtime but for some patients it can take a long time for the area to settle.

## **Treatment**

To help reduce the swelling, there are a number of treatments that we would recommend. Your nurse or physiotherapist will discuss with you about the most appropriate treatments.

They may include:-

- Skin care
- Lymph pads

- Simple lymph drainage massage
- Kinesio taping
- Exercise
- Antibiotics
- Wearing a good supportive bra

It may be appropriate that you are referred to the Oedema service at St Oswald's Hospice for more complex assessment and treatment. This will be discussed with you before a referral is made.

Some of the treatments may cause you some discomfort across your scar or swollen area. The discomfort should be minimal.

## Skin care

Following breast treatment the skin can become very dry and is at risk of cracking which can introduce infection called Cellulitis into the area.

Any break or injury to the skin may allow an infection to occur.

**If this happens the areas may suddenly feel hot, red, more swollen and painful.**

**You may also feel generally unwell. The infection can be treated with a course of antibiotics - you will need to see your doctor immediately.**

It is important to look after your skin to reduce the risk of infection. Apply an unperfumed moisturising cream such as:-

- Hydromol Cream
- Doublebase

Apply after every wash to help keep the skin supple and prevent it becoming dry and cracked.

Avoid creams that contain Lanolin as your skin can become sensitive. These can be obtained on prescription. If you are entitled to free prescriptions ask your nurse or physiotherapist for more advice.

## General skin care advice

- Keep the skin around the swollen area protected from the sun and sunburn - use sunscreen and insect repellent
- **Do not** have blood samples or blood pressure taken on the side of your breast surgery. If you have had a bilateral mastectomy you can have blood pressure and blood samples taken from your legs
- **Do not** have acupuncture or injections on the side of your surgery

## Lymph pads

This is a thin flexible foam that has 'raised bumps' on one side. This can help to stimulate the lymphatic flow and increase drainage. The foam is very thin and is worn with the raised bumps next to the skin. Your bra holds the foam in place.

## Simple lymph drainage massage

### What is simple lymphatic drainage (SLD)?

SLD is a technique of manual lymphatic drainage that you can perform at home either on your own or with help.

It is a combination of breathing exercises and specialised self massage techniques based on the principles of manual lymphatic drainage.

### Why should I do SLD?

By doing the technique as instructed you will be aiming to reduce and control the swelling.

### How does SLD work?

It is thought that SLD works on the lymphatic system by helping to drain the extra fluid into the healthy part of the lymphatic system.

It does this by improving the contractibility of the lymphatic collectors and enhances the removal of unwanted proteins.

Some important points to remember:

- Use gentle slow hand movements – the skin should not get red
- Unaffected areas are treated repeatedly
- Use a small amount of talc if the hands are hot
- Use the sequence described to you by your therapist. It should be similar to the instructions given in this booklet
- Concentrate on the trunk and breast area if you have been instructed to do so
- Treatment should take about 10 – 20 minutes and should be done on a daily basis

## **Why do we use breathing?**

- To help the flow of fluid into the main drainage vessels
- To help with relaxation

## **Why do we treat the neck?**

- To enhance lymph and venous return through the large vessels
- To reduce resistance to lymph flow

## **Why do we treat the unaffected lymph and nodes and trunk?**

- To encourage the lymph nodes and vessels to empty
- To help create a suction effect that pulls lymph from the swollen areas
- To help establish new routes for the fluid to drain into

## SLD technique for drainage of the upper limb

### Step 1: Breathing

- Sit or lie down with shoulders relaxed and hands resting below the ribs
- Breathe in and feel your abdomen rising
- Slowly breathe out and press gently inwards with your hands
- Repeat 5 times



### Step 2: The neck and top of the shoulders

- Place your relaxed hands on your neck below your ears
- Gently stretch or stroke your skin downwards towards your shoulders and release
- Cross your hands over and place them on the shoulders. Stroke inwards to the hollow behind the collarbone. Use your fingers to make gentle pressures into the hollow behind the collarbone
- Repeat 10 times at each position



### Step 3: The axilla (armpit)

- Starting in the axilla (armpit) on the non-swollen (left/right) side and using a light pressure and a circular upward movement, gently stretch the skin up into the axilla
- Repeat this 10 times



## Step 4: The chest

- Place the flat of the hands onto the chest close to the non-swollen arm/breast
- Gently stretch the skin towards the non-swollen arm/breast
- Repeat this 5 times, then move your hand across the breast bone and repeat
- Swap to use the opposite hand and continue repeating the same technique across the chest
- Move the hands across the chest at different levels always moving the skin towards the non-swollen side



If you have chest wall swelling, your practitioner may recommend that you also perform SLD massage towards your groin area.

## Step 5: The groin

On the swollen side (right /left) start at the lower part of the abdomen and gently stretch the skin down towards your groin before letting your hand relax.

Repeat this 10 times.

## Step 6: The abdomen

Move your hand onto your abdomen below your navel on the swollen side, stretch the skin towards the groin and then relax your hand.

Repeat 10 times.

Move your hand above your navel on the waistline and stretch the skin down towards the groin.

Repeat 10 times.

Place your hand a little higher up your body and repeat the above for a further 10 times.

After each set of 10 start the massage a little higher.

Always direct the stroke of the massage towards the groin area.

You should repeat steps 2-4 or 2-6 for about 10-20 minutes.

## **Step 7: Breathing**

Perform breathing exercises, as directed in Step 1, to complete the sequence.

## **Kinesio taping**

### **What is kinesio taping?**

Kinesio taping is a treatment for lymphoedema, muscle facilitation/relaxation, pain and scar problems. The tape is 100% cotton with elasticity of up to 30-40%. It is designed to allow the skin to move depending on its application and its function. The tape is very light weight and causes no discomfort.

### **How does kinesio taping work?**

The tape helps by increasing the body's ability to drain lymphatic fluid to healthy lymph nodes. The tape lifts the skin in the affected area and increases the space in which lymphatic fluid flows resulting in decreased pressure and irritation on sensory receptors. The tape may also reduce pain, and improve rehabilitation. We will always use a test patch on your skin to ensure you are not allergic to the tape.



## General advice

- Do not get the tape wet until 1 hour after application
- After application – rub the tape gently to activate the adhesive
- Ensure your skin is dry and intact
- Skin should be free of sweat, oil and lotion prior to application
- Round off the edges of the tape as this prevents it rolling up
- After bathing do not rub the tape to dry, pat gently with a towel
- The tape is either water resistant or water proof – if it gets wet it will dry – **do not use a hair dryer to dry the tape as this will cause the adhesive to stick more to your skin**
- Remove the tape in the direction of hair growth by rolling it off using the base of the hand or pulling the skin back from the tape with your fingers. Water, soap, lotion and oil may also be used to aid removal

## How long do I use the tape for?

The tape can remain in place for 3-5 days. Give your skin a 2 day rest period before reapplying the tape.

Your nurse/physiotherapist will discuss and teach you how to apply the tape. We will also devise a treatment plan for you to follow.

## Exercise

It is important that you continue to perform arm exercises as recommended by your physiotherapist.

## Antibiotics

Sometimes antibiotics are required if an infection is present. Your nurse/physiotherapist will discuss this further.

## **Wearing a good supportive bra**

Wearing a supportive bra can be helpful to support the breast and help to improve the drainage. Sometimes wearing a soft sports bra will be more comfortable. We would recommend not to wear an underwire bra until the swelling has settled. Your nurse/physiotherapist can give you more advice. You may be advised to wear a special bra that offers more support and compression to treat the swelling.

## **Contacts**

If you have any concerns or questions please contact your nurse or physiotherapist, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm:

Hexham General Hospital  
Telephone: 01434 655 386

North Tyneside General Hospital  
Telephone: 0191 293 4183 or 0191 293 4064

Wansbeck General Hospital  
Telephone: 01670 564 010 or 01670 529 636

## **Sources of information**

Breast Cancer Care Helpline  
0808 800 6000 or Website  
**[www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)**

Macmillan Cancer Relief Helpline  
0845 601 6161 or Website  
**[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)**

Breast Care Campaign  
**[www.breastcare.co.uk](http://www.breastcare.co.uk)**

Lymphoedema Support Network  
020 7351 0990  
**[www.lymphoedema.org](http://www.lymphoedema.org)**

## Notes

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## **Alternative Formats**

If you would like a copy of this information in large print, another language, audio tape or other format please call the Contact Centre on **03 44 811 8118**

## **Other sources of information**

### **NHS 111**

### **NHS Choices**

[www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx)

### **NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)**

[www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

### **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

Freephone: **0800 032 0202**

Text: 01670 511098

Email: [northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk](mailto:northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk)

### **Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust**

General Enquiries **03 44 811 8111**

[www.northumbria.nhs.uk](http://www.northumbria.nhs.uk)

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