

Overview

Lymphoedema

- Overview
- [Causes](#)
- [Diagnosis](#)
- [Treatment](#)
- [Prevention](#)

Lymphoedema is a long-term (chronic) condition that causes swelling in the body's tissues. It can affect any part of the body but usually develops in the arms or legs.



Lymphoedema develops when the lymphatic system does not work properly. The lymphatic system is a network of channels and glands throughout the body. It helps fight infection and remove excess fluid.

It's important to diagnose and treat lymphoedema as soon as possible. If it's not treated, it can get

worse.

Symptoms of lymphoedema

The main symptom of lymphoedema is swelling in all or part of a limb (arm or leg). It can affect another part of the body too.

You may find it hard to fit into clothes. Your jewellery and watches can feel tight.

At first, the swelling may come and go. It may get worse during the day and improve overnight. Without treatment, it usually becomes more severe and does not go away.

Other symptoms in an affected body part can include:

- an aching, heavy feeling
- difficulty with movement
- skin infections
- hard, tight skin
- folds in the skin
- wart-like growths on the skin
- fluid leaking through the skin

Causes of lymphoedema

The cause of lymphoedema is usually a problem with the lymphatic system.

The lymphatic system is a network of vessels and glands spread throughout the body. The lymphatic system helps fight infection and drain fluid from tissues in your body.

There are 2 main types of lymphoedema:

- primary lymphoedema
- secondary lymphoedema

The cause of primary lymphoedema is an alteration (mutation) in the genes that affect the lymphatic system. It can develop at any age. But it usually starts during infancy, adolescence, or early adulthood.

The cause of secondary lymphoedema is damage to the lymphatic system. Cancer treatment, infection or injury can damage to the lymphatic system. An inflammation (swelling) or lack of movement in a limb can also lead to lymphoedema.

Read more about the [causes of lymphoedema](#)

Who's affected by lymphoedema

Around 15,000 people in Ireland are living with lymphoedema.

Primary lymphoedema is rare. It may affect around 1 in 6,000 people. Secondary lymphoedema is

more common.

Secondary lymphoedema affects around:

- 2 in 10 people with [breast cancer](#)
- 5 in 10 people with vulval cancer
- 3 in 10 people with penile cancer

People who have treatment for melanoma in the lymph nodes in the groin can also get lymphoedema.

Your treatment team will tell you if your cancer or cancer treatment could cause lymphoedema.

The treatment planned will try to avoid damage to your lymph nodes. Lymph nodes are pea-sized lumps of tissue that contain white blood cells. They help remove bacteria, viruses and other causes of infection from your body.

Read more about [lymphoedema and cancer - cancer.ie](#)

Diagnosing lymphoedema

See your GP if you have the symptoms of lymphoedema, such as swelling in your arms and legs. They may refer you to a specialist.

Doctors can diagnose lymphoedema from your symptoms and medical history. They'll examine the affected body part and measure it to see if it's enlarged.

You may need more tests to assess and track your condition.

Read more about [diagnosing lymphoedema](#)

Treating lymphoedema

There's no cure for lymphoedema. But it's possible to control the main symptoms. There are techniques to reduce fluid build-up and improve the flow of fluid through the lymphatic system.

Treatment includes:

- wearing compression garments
- taking care of your skin
- moving and exercising often
- having a healthy diet and lifestyle
- using specialised massage techniques

If you keep up your treatment plan, your symptoms should become less noticeable.

Read more about [treating lymphoedema](#)

Complications of lymphoedema

Lymphoedema can have a big psychological impact.

[Cellulitis](#) is another common complication of lymphoedema. It can be serious if not treated quickly.

Cellulitis

If you have lymphoedema, there is excess fluid in your tissues. This increases your risk of infection.

Cellulitis is a bacterial infection of the dermis (deep layer of skin). Cellulitis can sometimes cause lymphoedema.

Symptoms of cellulitis can include:

- redness and a feeling of heat in the skin
- pain and increased swelling in the affected area
- a high temperature
- chills

The treatment for cellulitis is usually oral [antibiotics](#) (taken by mouth).

Severe cases may need intravenous antibiotics (given into a vein). You need to have this treatment in a hospital.

Psychological impact

Living with a condition that affects your appearance can cause a great deal of distress. This can lead to periods of [depression](#).

You may have depression if you've been feeling down for the past few months and no longer find pleasure in things you usually enjoy.

If this is the case, talk to your GP or a member of your lymphoedema treatment team. Effective treatments are available for depression.

Talking to other people with lymphoedema can be reassuring. It can help to decrease feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety.

Content supplied by the [NHS](#) and adapted for Ireland by the HSE

Page last reviewed: 25 March 2021

Next review due: 25 March 2024

This project has received funding from the Government of Ireland's Sláintecare Integration Fund 2019 under Grant Agreement Number 123.

HSE Live - we're here to help

Monday to Friday: 8am to 8pm

Saturday: 9am to 5pm

Sunday: Closed

Bank holidays: Closed

Freephone: [1800 700 700](tel:1800700700)

From outside Ireland: [00 353 1 240 8787](tel:0035312408787)

[HSE Facebook](#)

[HSE Instagram](#)

[HSE TikTok](#)

[HSE YouTube](#)

[HSE LinkedIn](#)

[HSE X \(Twitter\)](#)

[Complaints and feedback](#)

[Emergencies](#)

[Cookie settings](#)

[Cookie statement](#)

[Accessibility](#)

[Privacy statement](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

© Health Service Executive