



Physiotherapy department

Instructions for care of your arm after surgery or radiotherapy to the upper limb and chest wall

Any type of surgery or radiotherapy involving the lymph nodes under the arm disrupts the working of the lymphatic system. This may result in lymphoedema which is swelling of the arm, breast or chest wall.

It is difficult to predict who will go on to develop lymphoedema; however, some patients have developed it after an injury such as a cut or scratch to the arm or after an activity which increases the circulation in the arm.

The following information is designed to help you reduce the chance of developing lymphoedema in your arm.

Skin care

Lymphoedema can occur as a result of an infection in your arm or breast and cracked or dry skin can be an entry point for infection. Good skin care greatly reduces the risk of infection.

- Moisturise your arm, scar and chest wall daily with a moisturising cream or lotion. Apply the cream gently starting at the top of your arm and working downwards towards your hand. Always use upward strokes to apply the cream.
- Apply hand cream throughout the day when you have used or washed your hands.
- Try to avoid blood tests or injections in the arm on the affected side.
- Try to avoid getting cuts and scratches. Wear gloves when gardening, washing up and getting things out of the oven.
- Be careful when handling pets to avoid cuts and scratches.
- Do not shave under your arm with a wet razor or use wax to remove hair. Use an electric razor or a hair removal cream.
- Be careful when cutting fingernails and use a cuticle cream on the cuticles.
- Treat any cuts or grazes to the limb promptly by washing the area and applying an antiseptic cream. If the area becomes red and infected, go to your GP and get some antibiotics.
- Try to avoid getting bitten on your arm by insects. Use an insect repellent. Treat any insect bites immediately with an antihistamine cream. If the area becomes inflamed and infected, get some antibiotics from your GP.

Circulation

- Try to avoid prolonged, repetitive or strenuous movements with the arm.
- Try to avoid heavy lifting or pushing loads for any length of time. This could strain the muscles and ligaments and cause an increase in circulation. Use the other arm if possible.
- Never carry heavy shopping bags.
- Do not wear anything too tight which may restrict your circulation such as tight sleeves or jewellery.
- Do not have blood pressure checks on the affected arm.
- Avoid sunburn on the affected side. Use a high factor suncream.

Exercise

Moderate exercise is beneficial in preventing/treating lymphoedema. The action of the muscles contracting and relaxing in the arms acts like a pump and encourages fluid to move out of the tissues and back into the lymphatic system.

Strenuous, repetitive exercise, however, may overload the lymphatic system and cause swelling if it is not done in a controlled, graduated manner. This doesn't mean that you can't do strenuous activity such as playing tennis, squash, or weight lifting. It does mean that you have to be careful when going back to them after finishing your treatment or taking them up for the first time. Always start with the lowest weight and lowest number of repetitions and build up very slowly in a controlled manner.

With any sporting activity, start by just warming up or having a knockabout and gradually build up over a period of time until you are able to play the whole game.

Stop doing all activities if your arm starts to ache and let it rest. Next time you do that activity, do it for a shorter period of time and stop before your arm starts to ache.

Most people return to all the activities they used to do before their surgery and radiotherapy. Use common sense and remember that little and often is better than doing too much at any one time.

If your arm swells, contact your GP or hospital doctor for advice.

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

We try to ensure that all our information given to patients is accurate, balanced and based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact **patient.information@christie.nhs.uk**

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The Christie NHS Foundation Trust
Wilmslow Road
Manchester M20 4BX

Tel: 0161 446 3000
www.christie.nhs.uk

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