

Preventing lymphoedema

- The causes of lymphoedema following breast cancer surgery are not completely understood
- It is not clear why some women develop the condition, while others who have received the same treatments, do not
- Lymphoedema can happen at any time after breast cancer surgery, and up to years later
- It can be a disabling condition which we aim to help prevent
- Weight gain is known to increase your risk of developing lymphoedema after treatment
- Infection or injury to your arm on the side of lymph node removal may increase your risk, and you may receive advice about preventing this

Changes to old advice

In the past, you may have been told to avoid:

- having blood taken
- having injections
- having your blood pressure taken

from the arm on the same side as your breast cancer treatment.

However, it was not clear as to whether these procedures increased your risk of lymphoedema or not.

New evidence has shown that they do not affect your risk, if undertaken in a sterile, hospital environment.

Giving medications intravenously (into veins via a drip), is a crucial way of treating many conditions in hospital, and can be life-saving. If you require surgery of any kind in the future, you will usually need an intravenous (IV) drip.

Taking blood and inserting IV drips is usually done most easily and safely, using veins in the hands and arms.

We feel it is important that you understand that it IS SAFE:

- to have blood taken
- to receive injections
- to have your blood pressure taken

from the arm on the same side as previous breast cancer treatment.

You will no longer be advised to avoid this while in hospital, and it will not be considered necessary to wear a wristband to identify your arm as 'at risk' (although you may carry an information card for use outside of hospital).

Further information

For more information please talk to your breast cancer nurse, your breast surgeon or your anaesthetist at Torbay Hospital.

Other sources of information (?)

We aim to:

- Dispel myths around what puts you at risk of lymphoedema after your treatment
- Inform you on what procedures are safe to have after your treatment, when in hospital

What is lymphoedema?

- Pronounced lim-fo-dee-ma
- Means long-term (chronic) swelling
- Caused by blockage of the normal fluid drainage channels in the body (the lymphatic system)
- In the arms, fluid drains from finger tips to the armpit along these channels
- If channels are damaged or removed during radiotherapy or surgery to the armpit, fluid will not drain, and the arm can swell
- Blood drains separately from fingertips to the armpit in vein

Who is this for?

- Anyone who is preparing to have breast cancer surgery with removal of axillary (armpit) lymph nodes
- Anyone who has undergone previous breast cancer treatment/surgery, and is requiring further surgery or medical treatment in hospital

Why is this information necessary?

- Breast cancer and its treatment presents risks and side effects, which you will receive advice on how to prevent
- Lymphoedema is one condition which may be associated with certain treatments for breast cancer, particularly radiotherapy to the armpit, and removal of lymph nodes from the armpit
- Guidance on how to prevent lymphoedema after breast surgery is changing, as new research and evidence becomes available



**PATIENT
INFORMATION**

Having surgery, after breast cancer treatment?

A patient information leaflet

