

Information for patients at risk of lymphoedema undergoing anaesthesia and surgery

Lymphoedema is a condition in which lymphatic fluid does not drain properly from an arm or leg causing swelling and discomfort. Every patient who has had cancer surgery involving the removal of the glands (lymph nodes) can be at risk of developing lymphoedema in their limbs, although the risk is small. More rarely it can develop following other types of surgery. Radiotherapy, chemotherapy and obesity can also increase the risk.

Lymphoedema may develop several years after surgery, which is why it is important to tell doctors and nurses about any previous cancer surgery you have had.

Having an operation under general anaesthesia means staff at the hospital will need to measure your blood pressure and put a cannula (a thin plastic tube) in a vein in your arm. If you are having a hand or wrist operation, the surgeon would usually use a tourniquet (a tight band) during surgery to reduce blood loss.

Although there is little evidence, these procedures could potentially trigger lymphoedema on the arm on the side from which glands have been previously removed. Therefore, whenever possible, staff should use the arm on the other side. Sometimes they may mark the 'at risk' arm to remind other staff not to use it. If they have to use a tourniquet on the affected limb, they will only do so for a short time.

If there is no lymphoedema in the 'at risk' arm, and the other arm cannot be used for whatever reason, it is reasonable to put a cannula or use a blood pressure cuff on the affected arm, especially in an emergency situation.

If you have had glands removed from both sides of your body, your anaesthetist will usually put a cannula in your non-dominant arm (the one you don't usually write with) or sometimes may put one in a foot.

You should discuss these risks and the best options for you with your anaesthetist.

Further information on lymphoedema can be found via the links below:

Macmillan Cancer Support
bit.ly/2xLIATd

Lymphoedema Support Network
www.lymphoedema.org

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RCoA

Royal College of Anaesthetists



Tell us what you think

We welcome suggestions to improve this leaflet. If you have any comments that you would like to make, please email them to patientinformation@rcoa.ac.uk

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