

Oedema (Swelling) in the Hand

This leaflet offers more information about oedema in the hand. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to the therapist in charge of your care.

What is oedema and why have I got it?

After an injury or surgery, your body's natural response is to send fluid to the affected area to start the healing process. Oedema is a swelling caused by the build-up of excessive fluid. Oedema in the hand is caused by several different conditions or can occur after surgery to the fingers or hand. With some medical conditions it can occur more generally.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Your hand may be puffy and will look and feel swollen.
- The skin may become shiny and feel tight.
- This may be in a small area such as a specific joint or it may affect the whole hand and all the fingers.

Do I need any tests to confirm the diagnosis?

No. Your hand therapist will assess and measure the oedema and will use these measurements to review how you are responding to treatment.

What treatments are available?

Treatment will depend on the cause of the oedema and may include rest, cold treatment, compression and elevation or a combination of these.

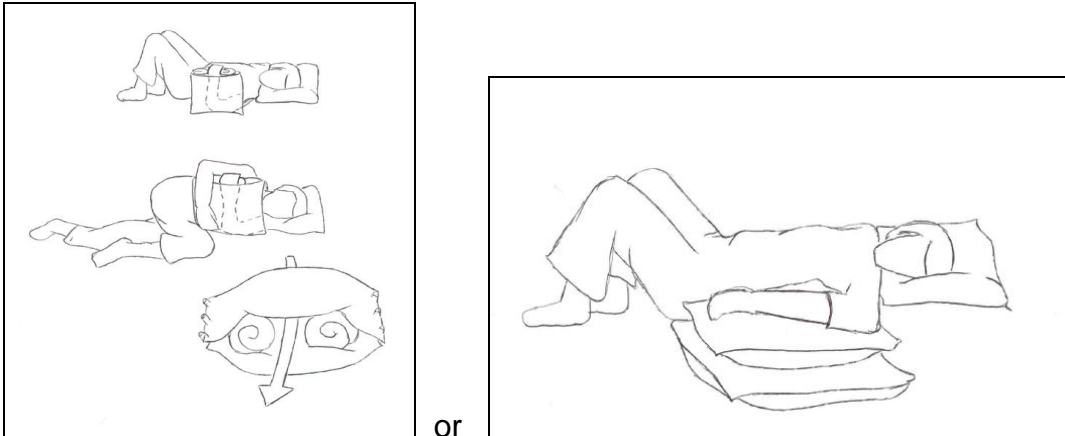
The following are methods that your hand therapist may suggest – s/he will give you more information accordingly.

Kinesiology tape is elastic cotton tape which can help create a 'lifting' action on the surface of your skin to improve the drainage of oedema. You should be given a separate information sheet with further instructions on the use of this tape.

Elevation uses gravity to help fluid to flow out of the traumatised area(s).

You need to make a gentle slope from the hand to the shoulder, with the entire arm raised slightly above the level of the heart for elevation to work.

You can use pillows and towels to support your arm into elevation, while you are sleeping, resting or sitting down (see below).



Compression aims to limit the amount of space where swelling can build up and may push fluid out of the tissue.

A variety of dressings or garments is used to apply compression, including:

- Coban: a self-adhesive elasticated wrap.
- Oedema gloves: ready-made gloves of a blend of nylon and Lycra.
- Tubigrip: tubular sleeves made of cotton and elastic. Your hand therapist will give you the correct width and length. The Tubigrip should be worn as instructed by your therapist:

Full time / overnight / _____

You should remove the Tubigrip to wash or clean your skin regularly.

You should handwash the Tubigrip with warm, soapy water and then allow to air dry. Let the Tubigrip air dry thoroughly before putting it back on – but **do not** dry it on a radiator, in direct sunlight or in a tumble dryer.

You can buy more Tubigrip if you need it, online or from most pharmacies.

- Digi-sleeves: a ready-to-wear finger sleeve made of special fabric. Your hand therapist will give you the correct width and length. This sleeve should be worn as instructed by your therapist:

Full time / overnight / _____.

Make sure the seams are on the outside of the sleeve, away from your skin.

You should remove the digi-sleeve to wash or clean your skin regularly.

You should handwash the digi-sleeve with warm, soapy water and then allow to air dry. Let the digi-sleeve air dry thoroughly before putting it back on – but **do not** dry it on a radiator, in direct sunlight or in a tumble dryer.

Contrast bathing uses the contrast of heat and cold to increase the circulatory flow to the affected area and encourage an increased uptake of the fluid in the hand. Do this as instructed by your therapist.

A chip bag is a small bag made of shredded foam chips layered between two pieces of fabric which can be placed under your compression sleeve or garment to help break down

any fluid that has become thickened (fibrosed). Chip bags come in a variety of shapes and sizes and as you wear them, they knead and massage the hardened areas to help soften the tissue.

Retrograde massage helps to push fluid out of the hand. This should be performed with the hand raised. It may be more comfortable to massage with a cream or moisturiser. Using firm pressure with your other hand, massage from the fingertips in a downwards motion. Move down the hand and arm towards your body. Your therapist should provide more information on when and for how long you should do this.

Cold treatment is where an ice or cold pack is used in the early stages of injury, normally for about 10-15 minutes and with a lining such as a damp tea towel. You should be careful not to damage your skin by exposing it for too long to extreme cold and it should be checked regularly whilst using a cold pack.

If you find you have altered sensation around the swelling, then this should be discussed in detail with your hand therapist.

Active motion creates muscle pumping, soft tissue movement and compression of veins and lymphatic vessels, all of which help control oedema. Your hand therapist should give you specific exercises for your condition to help with the oedema. You should do these exercises with your hand above your head (in elevation) to help with fluid return and drainage.

What happens if I don't get treatment?

If the oedema is left in your fingers or hand it can become harder to reduce, as the fluid may become more gel-like. Any continuing oedema may cause stiffness over time.

Is there anything I can do to help myself?

Use the techniques your hand therapist has advised and you can also discuss anti-inflammatory medication with your pharmacist or GP.

Useful sources of information

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Oedema/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Contact us

If you have any questions regarding the information provided in this leaflet, please feel free to discuss them with your therapist at your next appointment.

For more urgent queries the team can be contacted on the **treatment enquiries** phone number listed below.



Your therapist's name is _____

Treatment enquiries: 020 8725 1038 (answer phone only, leave a message and we will call back)

Appointments: 020 8725 0007

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough wings (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

Tel: 111

AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all of our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website (www.accessable.co.uk). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



Reference: THE_MOH_03 Published: June 2022 Review date: June 2024