

## Hand therapy

# Swelling (oedema) management

## Information for patients, relatives and carers

### What is swelling?

Swelling, or oedema, is a build-up of fluid in the body. It can be the result of trauma, infection, arthritis or circulatory problems. Swelling occurs after injury and surgery and can last for a few months.

The leaflet explains how to manage your swelling and who to contact with any questions or concerns.

### How will swelling affect me?

It is important to manage your swelling. It can heal slowly and increases the risk of infection after surgery. It can reduce your ability to move your fingers and / or wrist. This can lead to stiffness, and pain can get worse as a result.

### How can I reduce the swelling?

**Elevation:** position your arm or hand above the level of your heart. If you can, use your own muscles to hold your hand up, rather than using a collar and cuff, or sling. This lets gravity help drain the excess fluid away from the hand.

**Compression:** compression gloves and compressive bandage can help stop or reduce swelling on your fingers, wrist and / or hand. Coban™ wrap/cohesion bandage/vet wrap or Tubigrip™ are often used.

**Retrograde massage:** this type of massage helps encourage fluid to move out of your hand and into your arm:

Put your arm or hand higher than your heart. Massage your hand using light stroking movements, moving:

- from the fingertips to the palm
- from fingertips to the back of your hand
- across the wrist towards the forearm.

You can use a moisturising cream to protect the skin.

**Contrast bathing:** this involves bathing your hand in hot and cold water. When you swap between hot and cold, your blood vessels expand and then narrow. This creates a pumping effect which helps move the fluid out of your hand.

How to do contrast bathing:

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- you need two bowls, one with comfortably hot water, one with cold water
  - dip the whole of your affected hand into the hot water for two minutes
  - switch to the cold water for one minute
  - repeat this process three to four times
  - make sure the last dip is into cold water
  - try to keep the water temperature constant. Add more hot water or cold water as needed.
  - your therapist may advise you to gently squeeze a sponge in each bowl

**Movement:** making a fist and straightening your fingers again and again helps reduce swelling. (Your hand therapist has other exercises if you find this difficult.)

Please contact your hand therapist for more information or if you have any problems.

## Useful contact details

To reschedule an appointment:

- 1) Phone: 020 3311 0333  
Option 1: If your appointment is on the same day.  
Option 2: If your appointment is another date in the future.
- 2) Email: [appointments@imperial.nhs.uk](mailto:appointments@imperial.nhs.uk)

To contact a therapist: [imperial.handtherapyimperial@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.handtherapyimperial@nhs.net).

## How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at [imperial.pals@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.pals@nhs.net) The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street  
London W2 1NY

Email: [ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net](mailto:ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net)

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

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## Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team:  
[imperial.communications@nhs.net](mailto:imperial.communications@nhs.net)

## Wi-fi

Wi-fi is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: [www.imperial.nhs.uk](http://www.imperial.nhs.uk)

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