

Understanding NICE guidance

Information for people who use NHS services

Treating chronic lymphoedema by liposuction

NICE 'interventional procedures guidance' advises the NHS on when and how new procedures can be used in clinical practice.

This leaflet is about when and how liposuction can be used in the NHS to treat people with chronic lymphoedema. It explains guidance (advice) from NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence).

Interventional procedures guidance makes recommendations on the safety of a procedure and how well it works. An interventional procedure is a test, treatment or surgery that involves a cut or puncture of the skin, or an endoscope to look inside the body, or energy sources such as X-rays, heat or ultrasound. The guidance does not cover whether or not the NHS should fund a procedure. Decisions about funding are taken by local NHS bodies (primary care trusts and hospital trusts) after considering how well the procedure works and whether it represents value for money for the NHS.

NICE has produced this guidance because the procedure is quite new. This means that there is not a lot of information yet about how well it works, how safe it is and which patients will benefit most from it.

This leaflet is written to help people who have been offered this procedure to decide whether to agree (consent) to it or not. It does not describe chronic lymphoedema or the procedure in detail – a member of your healthcare team should also give you full information and advice about these. The leaflet includes some questions you may want to ask your doctor to help you reach a decision. Some sources of further information and support are on the back page.



What has NICE said?

Although the studies that were available only looked at small numbers of patients, there is evidence to show that this procedure is safe. However, there is not enough evidence to say how well the procedure works. For this reason, NICE has said that if a doctor wants to use liposuction to treat chronic lymphoedema, they should make sure that extra steps are taken to explain the uncertainty about how well it works in the long term, as well as the potential risks of the procedure. The patient should also be told that they will need to wear compression garments indefinitely after the procedure. This should happen before the patient agrees (or doesn't agree) to the procedure. The patient should be given this leaflet and other written information as part of the discussion. There should also be special arrangements for monitoring what happens to the patient after the procedure.

NICE may look at this procedure again if more information becomes available.

This procedure may not be the only possible treatment for chronic lymphoedema. Your healthcare team should talk to you about whether it is suitable for you and about any other treatment options available.

Treating chronic lymphoedema by liposuction

The procedure is not described in detail here – please talk to your specialist for a full description.

The lymphatic system is a network of vessels and nodes (or lymph glands), which drains excess fluid from the body's tissues into the bloodstream.

Lymphoedema is the abnormal build-up of lymph fluid in the fatty tissues of the arm or leg, which causes swelling in the affected limb. It happens because the lymphatic system is not working properly. Lymphoedema can also occur if the lymph glands have been removed, which often happens during surgery for breast cancer.

Chronic lymphoedema can cause swollen disfigurement of the affected limb, reduced movement, repeated infections, pain and distress. Chronic means that the condition lasts for a long time.

Liposuction for chronic lymphoedema involves the removal of fat beneath the skin of the affected limb. The procedure is carried out under a general or local anaesthetic. The surgeon makes one or more small cuts in the skin of the affected limb and inserts a small metal tube through these cuts. The tube is then attached to a vacuum pump, which is moved around to break up and suck away the fat cells. This helps to reduce the swelling in the limb. After the procedure, the person will need to wear a special compression garment which is gradually reduced in size over time (on three or four occasions) to help the swelling go down further.

What does this mean for me?

If your doctor has offered you liposuction for chronic lymphoedema, they should tell you that NICE has decided that while the procedure appears to be safe there are still uncertainties about how well it works. This does not mean that the procedure should not be done, but that your doctor should fully explain what is involved in having the procedure and discuss the possible benefits and risks with you. You should also be told that you will need to wear compression garments for a long time after the procedure. You should only be asked if you want to agree to this procedure after this discussion has taken place. You should be given written information, including this leaflet, and have the opportunity to discuss it with your doctor before making your decision.

You may want to ask the questions below

- What does the procedure involve?
- What are the benefits I might get?
- How good are my chances of getting those benefits? Could having the procedure make me feel worse?
- Are there alternative procedures?
- What are the risks of the procedure?
- Are the risks minor or serious? How likely are they to happen?
- What care will I need after the operation?
- What happens if something goes wrong?
- What may happen if I don't have the procedure?

Summary of possible benefits and risks

Some of the benefits and risks seen in the studies considered by NICE are briefly described below. NICE looked at five studies on this procedure.

How well does the procedure work?

In total, five small studies looked at how well liposuction for the removal of fatty tissue works.

In one study, 35 patients were treated with liposuction and compression garments. One year after liposuction, swelling was reduced by over 100% and all 35 patients said they felt less tired, had less pain, were more mobile and more able to carry out their day-to-day activities than before. This study also looked at 14 patients who were treated with compression garments alone without liposuction. After 1 year of treatment, swelling was reduced but not by as much (only 50%) as in the group of people who also had liposuction. These patients did not have significant improvements in tiredness, pain or movement, or in their ability to perform their normal activities.

You might decide to have this procedure, to have a different procedure, or not to have a procedure at all.

In two other studies, a total of 44 patients were treated with liposuction and compression garments, and swelling was reduced.

As well as looking at these studies, NICE also asked expert advisers for their views. These advisers are clinical specialists in this field of medicine. The advisers said that the long-term benefits of the procedure are unknown and it is also not clear how well the procedure works compared with compression garments on their own.

Risks and possible problems

No safety problems were reported in three of the five studies that NICE looked at.

In two studies looking at a total of 43 patients, 1 patient had 'pins and needles' in the treated limb, another patient had reduced sensitivity to pain and touch, and 4 patients developed skin infections or other problems with the skin near the wound. Eight patients needed a blood transfusion.

As well as looking at these studies, NICE also asked expert advisers for their views. These advisers are clinical specialists in this field of medicine. The advisers said that, in theory, there are a number of possible problems that could happen with this procedure. These include bleeding, infection, bruising, pain, scarring and other problems at the site of the wound.

More information about chronic lymphoedema

NHS Direct online (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) may be a good starting point for finding out more. Your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) may also be able to give you further advice and support.

About NICE

NICE produces guidance (advice) for the NHS about preventing, diagnosing and treating different medical conditions. The guidance is written by independent experts including healthcare professionals and people representing patients and carers. They consider how well an interventional procedure works and how safe it is, and ask the opinions of expert advisers. Interventional procedures guidance applies to the whole of the NHS in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Staff working in the NHS are expected to follow this guidance.

To find out more about NICE, its work and how it reaches decisions, see www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance

This leaflet is about 'Liposuction for chronic lymphoedema'. This leaflet and the full guidance aimed at healthcare professionals are also available at www.nice.org.uk/IPG251

You can order printed copies of this leaflet from NICE publications (phone 0845 003 7783 or email publications@nice.org.uk and quote reference N1466).

We encourage voluntary sector organisations, NHS organisations and clinicians to use text from this booklet in their own information about this procedure.