

## Contact details

Care of Burns in Scotland (COBIS)  
National Managed Clinical Network

NHS National Services Scotland  
Gyle Square  
1 South Gyle Crescent  
Edinburgh  
EH12 9EB

**Website:** [www.cobis.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.cobis.scot.nhs.uk)

**Email:** [NSS.COBIS@nhs.scot](mailto:NSS.COBIS@nhs.scot)

**Notes**

## Management of oedema after a burn

### Information Leaflet



### What is oedema?

Oedema is the medical name for “swelling”. This leaflet will help you understand why you may have oedema following your burn injury and give you some advice about how to reduce swelling and prevent complications.

### Why do I have oedema?

Depending on the size of the burn, you may experience swelling immediately around the injured area or it may involve other parts of the body. For example, if your burn is on your arm, then your hand can also become swollen, due to the effects of gravity.

The swelling is caused by fluid leaking from blood vessels and collecting around damaged areas. Swelling tends to occur soon after injury and generally decreases after 48–72 hours, although this timescale can vary. The extent and location of the swelling will depend on how the burn was caused and the location and depth of the burn injury.

It is very important that the swelling is reduced as soon as possible. Otherwise it can increase pain, make it difficult to move, cause stiffness or deformity of joints, interfere with the normal functioning of your muscles, nerves and blood vessels and can cause a superficial burn to deepen.

If you have had a skin graft, tissue fluid and bleeding can affect the healing and in some cases, may cause the graft to fail. In this instance it is even more important to follow the advice below to minimise the negative effects of fluid.

### What can I do to reduce oedema?

There are steps that you can take to reduce the amount of swelling you have and to prevent it from getting worse.

#### Elevation

Elevation will encourage drainage of fluid and allow it to be reabsorbed by the body. The swollen part should be higher than the rest of the limb so that gravity can assist. Slings, pillows, tables and sometimes splints may be used to position your limb.

#### Movement

Movement encourages drainage of fluid. Muscles act as a pump, pushing fluid away from the swollen area. Your Therapist may show you specific exercises to help with this. Sometimes movement is not encouraged (e.g. recent skin graft). Please ask your therapist if you are unsure.

#### Upright position (for face, head or neck burns)

If you have facial swelling it is extremely important to maintain an upright position. You should avoid lying flat as this encourages fluid collection in your face and head which can lead to difficulty opening your eyes and may also affect your breathing.

#### Compression

Your therapist may bandage your hand with a stretchy bandage called “Coban” which helps to push the oedema out of the swollen area. If your burn has healed, you may also be given a compression glove.