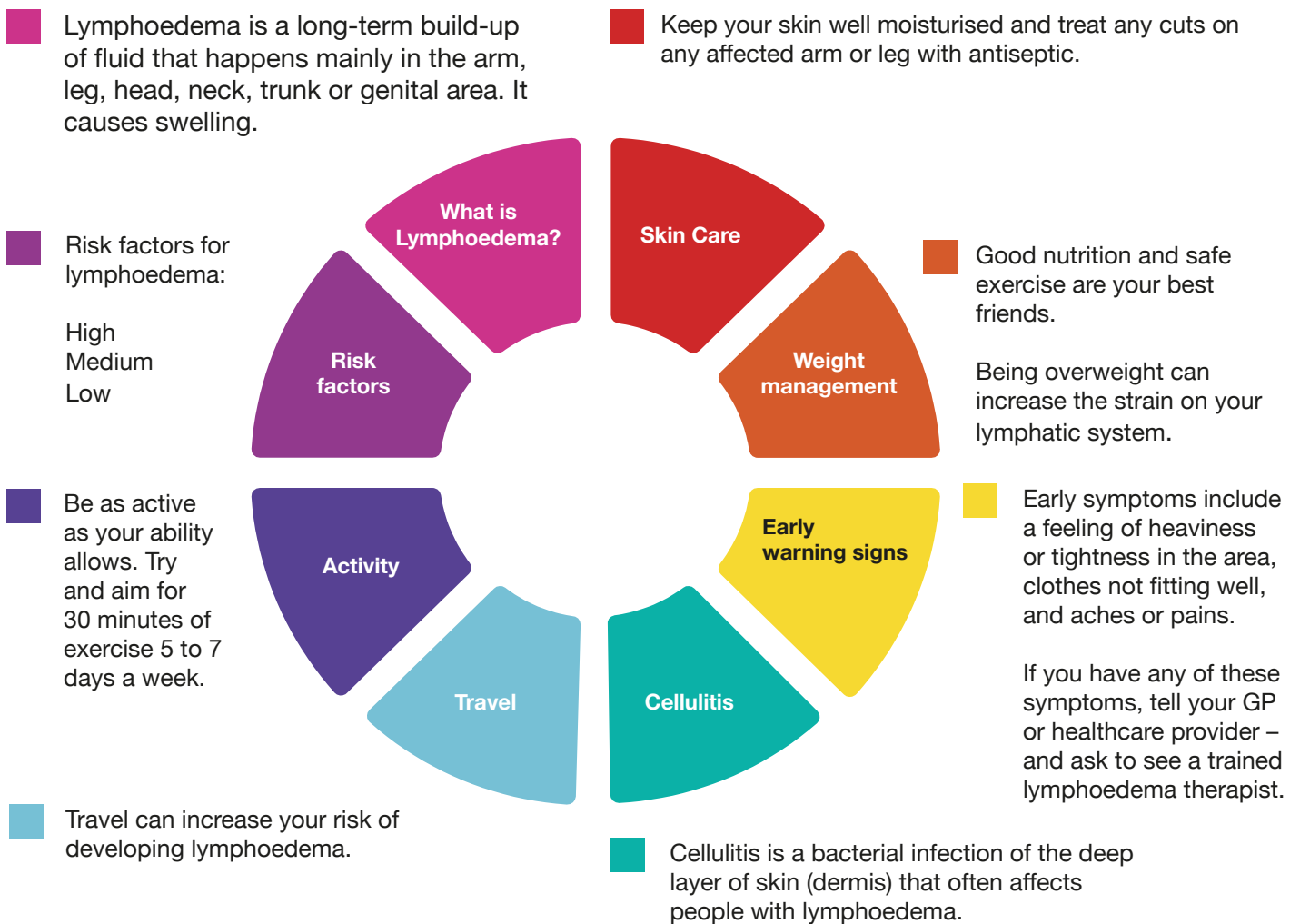Lymphoedema (pronounced lim-fo-dee-ma) can happen when surgery or radiation is used to treat cancer. The surgery or treatment may cause a build-up of fluid in your body that results in swelling. It happens because your lymph nodes have been removed or blocked, or because they have been damaged by radiation. It can occur in your arm, leg, head, neck, trunk or genital area. The body part affected depends on which area you had surgery or radiation.

The fact sheets will help you to work out your risk of developing lymphoedema. It will show you ways of helping the rest of your lymph nodes to do their job of draining lymphatic fluid in your body and carrying out its other important functions.

Lymphoedema can develop at any stage after your cancer treatment, but the risk of having it is highest in the first one to three years after treatment ends.

If lymphoedema is detected early, it is easier to manage and may be reversed.

Overview of lymphoedema and risk reduction;

Lymphoedema is a long-term build-up of fluid that happens mainly in the arm, leg, head, neck, trunk or genital area. It causes swelling.

Keep your skin well moisturised and treat any cuts on any affected arm or leg with antiseptic.

Risk factors for lymphoedema:

High
Medium
Low

Good nutrition and safe exercise are your best friends.

Being overweight can increase the strain on your lymphatic system.

Be as active as your ability allows. Try and aim for 30 minutes of exercise 5 to 7 days a week.

Early symptoms include a feeling of heaviness or tightness in the area, clothes not fitting well, and aches or pains.

If you have any of these symptoms, tell your GP or healthcare provider – and ask to see a trained lymphoedema therapist.

Travel can increase your risk of developing lymphoedema.

Cellulitis is a bacterial infection of the deep layer of skin (dermis) that often affects people with lymphoedema.

Wheel diagram sections: What is Lymphoedema? · Skin Care · Weight management · Early warning signs · Cellulitis · Travel · Activity · Risk factors

Irish Cancer Society

nccp
National Cancer Control Programme

NLF Ireland

Lymphoedema is when too much fluid builds up in your body. It is caused by your lymphatic system not working properly.

Your lymphatic system can be damaged if your lymph nodes have been removed or affected by radiation during treatment for cancer.

Lymphoedema can happen at the site where you have had surgery or radiation. It can also happen in your arms, legs, trunk, head, neck or genital area.

Your lymphatic system is important because it:

- Maintains the fluid balance in your body

- Monitors and runs the main waste disposal system for your cells and internal organs

- Transports fats, absorbing some fats from your digestive organs and transporting them into your bloodstream where they can be processed

- Monitors and runs your immune response – the lymph nodes are like a filtering plant, sifting the waste for any signs of virus or bacteria and setting up a battle against any invaders (this is why you get swollen lymph nodes when you have an infection)

The Lymphatic System