

By JILL FOSTER

The women left with bloated limbs when the body's plumbing goes haywire

WHEN sales manager Donna Hughes returned to her hotel room after a conference, she was tired after a long day on her feet and had been drinking afterwards with her colleagues.

But nothing could have prepared her for the sight of her leg as she got ready for bed. 'As I was undressing, I looked down and saw that my right leg was almost double the size of my left,' she says. 'It wasn't red or painful — and I hadn't noticed it while I was wearing my trousers.'

'And although it sounds odd now, I wasn't too concerned. I thought it was because I'd been on my feet all day, and I went to bed hoping it would have gone in the morning.'

But next day, her leg looked exactly the same. 'I was worried that there had been no change, but because I wasn't in any pain I got on with my day.'

Four years on, Donna's leg is still swollen. She suffers from lymphoedema, a condition where the lymphatic system — a filter network of tiny vessels which runs alongside the circulation and drains waste products from the blood — isn't working properly.

Normally, fluid drains from the lymph channels into the lymph nodes. These nodes act like filter stations that process the waste — the fluid itself goes back through the body into the circulation.

However, if the lymphatic system is faulty, the fluid it would normally drain away accumulates in the tissue and the area swells up.

The skin becomes like a soggy mattress, because there's too much fluid in the tissue, explains consultant vascular surgeon Eddie Chaloner, at the BMI Sloane Hospital in Beckenham, Kent: 'There are two types of lymphoedema. Primary lymphoedema is when there is an abnormality in the development of the lymphatic system.'

'Secondary lymphoedema is when the lymphatic system has been damaged in some way, maybe through infection, radiotherapy or surgery.' Up to one in four women who have undergone a mastectomy develop the problem.

PATIENTS can have swelling anywhere on the trunk or face, although the majority have it in their legs and sometimes in their arms.

Around 100,000 Britons have lymphoedema, but countless more could be living with it without a diagnosis, according to the Lymphoedema Support Network.

'It's extremely common, particularly in middle-aged women, although we don't know why,' says Mr Chaloner. 'The reason it's not being picked up is because it's not a priority for the average doctor because it's not life-threatening.' However it can be extremely debilitating and makes the skin vulnerable to infection.

Often, those with lymphoedema find it hard to get an accurate diagnosis 'simply because their GP has not come across the con-

dition before,' says Karen Friett, of the Lymphoedema Support Network. Indeed, when Donna saw her GP about her leg the next day, he had no idea why it had swollen.

'He wanted to rule out anything serious such as cancer, so he referred me to a blood specialist at Worcester Hospital,' says Donna, 31, who is married and lives in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire.

'I thought there must be something seriously wrong. At the hospital, I spent a day having blood tests and ultrasound scans to check what was happening with the blood flow in my legs.'

'But at the end of it, they still couldn't tell me what the problem was, although there was a small chance it was a blood clot so I should stop taking the Pill.'

Through her private healthcare plan, Donna was then referred to a vascular surgeon in a private clinic in Worcester.

'He examined me and looked through my notes and said either something was wrong with the flow of blood in my leg, or it could be lymphoedema. I had another ultrasound scan which showed the blood flow was fine, so that confirmed it was lymphoedema.'

'I'd Googled my symptoms and knew that there was a strong chance that this is what it was — what made it worse was that I'd also read there was nothing they could do to treat it.'

Leading up to the night at the hotel, Donna says there were signs she was suffering from the condition. 'I had swollen glands every now and again in my throat and in my arms, and was informed that this is a perfectly normal way that the body fights infections.'

'In recent weeks, I'd had an infection where the glands in my groin had swollen, but no one was able to identify what had caused it,' she says. 'I also noticed that some trousers were slightly tighter on one side and although it sounds silly, I thought it was just the trousers that had shrunk.'

Donna had secondary lymphoedema, thought to be caused by the infection in her groin.

There are currently no drugs or surgery that can treat lymphoedema. However, it can be managed with bandages or compression stockings, which encourage the lymphatic system to drain.

The stockings or bandages don't squeeze the limb as you might expect, but provide a resistance,

33%

The drop in lymphoedema risk among breast cancer patients who take up weightlifting

Coping mechanisms: Donna Hughes

helping to improve lymph movement by allowing your calf muscle to squeeze against it, says Kimby Osborne, a chiroprapist now working as an adviser on foot health.

She explains: 'When you flex your foot or put weight on your leg, you get a massaging effect which helps the circulation through the lymphatic system.'

'Most people would rather use stockings than bandages, as it's more convenient.'

BUT wearing a stocking for life was something that Donna was dreading. 'When the vascular surgeon confirmed it was lymphoedema, he brought out this horrendous long stocking. I was so embarrassed. I suddenly felt like I'd aged by 30 years because I'd have to wear it all the time.'

As well as wearing the stocking, Donna must take care not to cut her leg. As Mr Chaloner explains: 'The most common problem lymphoedema patients encounter is infections, because the skin is

much more porous. The bacteria that live on your skin can penetrate the skin of lymphoedema patients much more easily and the white blood cells find it harder to fight the infection because of the condition of the skin.'

'That can cause cellulitis — infection in the deep layers of the skin — which can be quite serious and lead to hospitalisation.'

Meanwhile, Donna's condition 'goes up and down' depending on her activity levels. 'I've had a hectic couple of weeks. I know that there are probably a few more millilitres of fluid in there than if I'd been resting.'

'Elevating my legs can help, and alcohol is definitely a no-no. I also do exercises to help. It's still distressing. I only ever wear trousers or long skirts now. I'm able to wear high heels, though not very easily.'

'Thankfully, the vascular surgeon recommended several brands of stocking to me, which have nice lacy tops that I felt are a bit more normal. I still want to feel like I'm 31, not 71.'

■ **INFORMATION** and advice at lymphoedema.org, 020 7351 4480.



Picture: STEWART WRITTLE

SECRETS OF AN A-LIST BODY

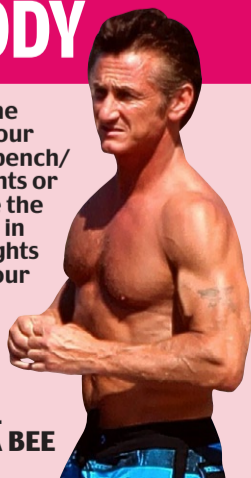
WE REVEAL how to get the enviable physique of the stars. This week, the bulging pecs of Oscar winner Sean Penn, 50:

WORKOUT SECRETS: Penn is a keen runner, which strips away fat, but he also lifts weights and practises budokon, a mix of martial arts and yoga.

TRY THIS: Lifting weights on a bar is a sure-fire way to strengthen the chest. Start with some light hand weights. Lie on a bench with your back flat against the surface

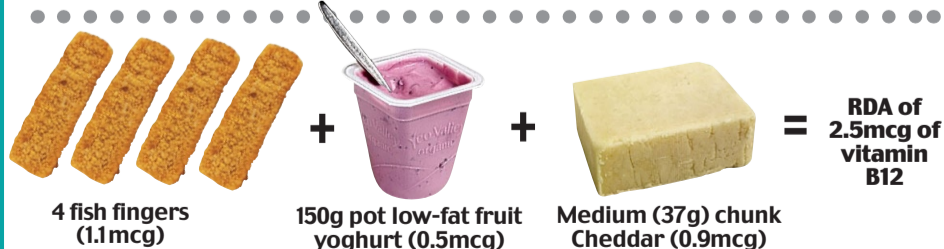
(you can also do this on the floor). Keep the back of your head in contact with the bench/floor. Hold the hand weights or bar at arm's length above the chest. Take a deep breath in and slowly lower the weights until they almost touch your chest. Exhale and push them back upwards. Avoid arching your back, but do tighten your buttocks to help stabilise the body. Repeat 15 times.

PETA BEE



VITAMIN MATHS

The foods that add up to your recommended daily allowance



VITAMIN B12 is needed for making red blood cells and keeping nerves healthy. If you eat a vegan diet, it can be difficult to get enough vitamin B12 because it's

found mainly in animal products — meat, fish, dairy and eggs. Other good food sources include fortified cereals, banana, broccoli and bananas.

ANGELA DOWDEN