



## Management of Head/Neck Lymphoedema

You may have Lymphoedema as a result of having had surgery and/or radiotherapy to your head/neck. This leaflet provides specific information and advice about managing your Lymphoedema.

### If I've had Surgery What Problems May I Encounter?

#### Scarring

Your operation will leave a scar which may initially feel uncomfortable and tight when you move your head, neck and shoulders. This will ease as you repeat your exercises and continue to stretch.. Adhering to your skin care management plan daily will also help to reduce tightness of the scar.

#### Sensation

It is quite common to experience numbness or tingling around your operation site and sometimes on your face. This can continue for up to 12 to 18 months, but it can be longer in some cases.

#### Swelling

It is common to experience swelling immediately after surgery due to the trauma as well as the removal of the lymph nodes. Your body will usually adapt to this change; however, if the swelling remains for longer than 3 months, this is called Lymphoedema.

### Lymphoedema Management Plan:

#### 1. Skin Care

You should moisturise your face, neck and chest daily. Samples of different creams are available for you to identify which suit you best. Unperfumed and lanolin free creams are recommended and your therapist will be able to advise you. Daily skin care can reduce the risk of skin infections.

#### 2. Movement & Exercise:

Regular movement and exercise is important as the pumping of the muscles encourages the flow of fluid through the vessels, thus improving lymphatic drainage. Exercise also helps to maintain the movement in your facial muscles, neck and shoulders and prevents stiffness in the joints. It is important to move your neck and shoulders following your operation in order to regain your full range of movement. You may find that these movements have become limited following your surgery and this is often due to swelling, discomfort, stitches, clips and the positioning of drains in your skin. Gentle exercises will help to regain your range of movement, help reduce swelling and prevent pain and stiffness in your shoulder and neck.

### How Often Should I Exercise?

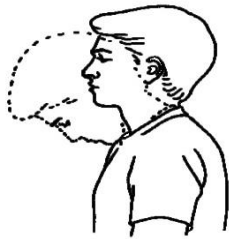
Neck and shoulder stiffness and tightness can occur long after surgery so it is important to carry on doing these exercises until you have regained the range of movement you had before your operation.

Radiotherapy to your neck area may also make the shoulder and neck stiffness worse. You should continue with these exercises during your treatment and after it has finished, as agreed with your therapist.

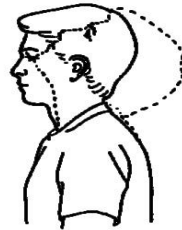
**Exercises should be performed 3 times a day. Repeat each exercise 5 times.**

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Tilt your head down towards your chest



Tilt your head back as if you are looking up at the ceiling.



Turn your head to the right as far as you are able. Repeat turning your head to the left.



Tilt your head towards your shoulder as if you are putting your ear on your shoulder. Repeat on the other side



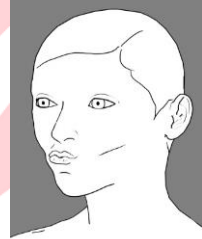
Roll your shoulders forwards. Repeat, rolling your shoulders backwards.



Lift your arms overhead as far as you can. Slowly bring them back down



Scrunch up your eyes and feel your face tightening. Hold and relax.



Purse lips together and push outwards as if you are going to kiss someone. Hold and relax.



Go on - give a really big smile! Feel the tension and then relax.

### When can I return to normal activities?

After six weeks your scar should be healed and you should be able to move your neck and shoulders quite comfortably. There are no set rules as to when you should return to work, sports or hobbies. People react and heal differently to treatment, leaving some with less energy than others. Remember to progress activities slowly and listen to your body.

- **Walking:** a good exercise to maintain or improve health after an operation. Short daily walks will help.
- **Driving:** avoid driving until you have full control of a vehicle. Do not drive unless you are well, alert and are able to respond in an emergency. You should check with your insurance company before you start driving.
- **Work:** this will depend on the type of job you do, and whether or not you will be receiving any further treatment. Your Surgeon, Physiotherapist or GP will be able to advise you on this.

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- **Sport/Leisure:** If your scars have healed and you have good movement, you may begin swimming at six weeks. Most other leisure activities can be resumed within two to three months.

## Posture

It is important to maintain a good posture. Avoid slouching when you are sitting down, and ensure you stand tall. It may be helpful to look at yourself in a mirror to ensure that your head and shoulders are in a good position. A good posture will help the movement of your shoulders and neck.

## Sleeping

It may be beneficial to sleep with two or more pillows to help drain the fluid back down towards the heart. If you always sleep on a particular side you may find that this side swells more, thus try changing your position.

### 3. Compression Garments

Compression garments may be provided to help improve your swelling. Please follow the instructions provided by your Lymphoedema therapist. Compression garments need to be washed regularly, and will be reviewed for replacement as required. If your head or neck becomes increasingly painful or discoloured when wearing your garment remove immediately and contact your Lymphoedema therapist for further advice.

### 4. Simple Lymphatic Drainage (SLD)

This very gentle massage is part of the daily treatment for your swelling. It helps move the fluid from the swollen area to an area that drains more freely. Your therapist will show you how to do SLD. This leaflet is a step by step guide. If you are unable to perform the massage by yourself, a partner or carer could help you. If you struggle reaching certain areas, try using a roller or a soft long-handled brush.

#### What to do:

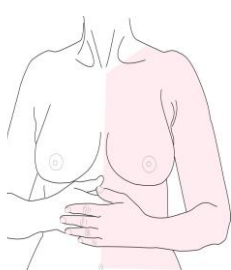
- Massage very slowly and gently. It should take about 15 to 20 minutes to complete
- Massage when you are comfortable, sitting or lying down is best
- Do not press too hard – your skin should not be marked by your pressure
- Creams and oils are not needed. If you are hot and sticky, use a small amount of talcum powder
- Do not massage over an area that is inflamed or infected, including cellulitis
- If you have any new or unexplained lumps: contact your GP or therapist immediately
- If you have recently finished radiotherapy, you need to wait for 6 weeks before you start to massage over that area, discuss this further with your therapist

The following steps are for swelling on both sides of your head, face and/or neck:

**Step 1 – Breathing**

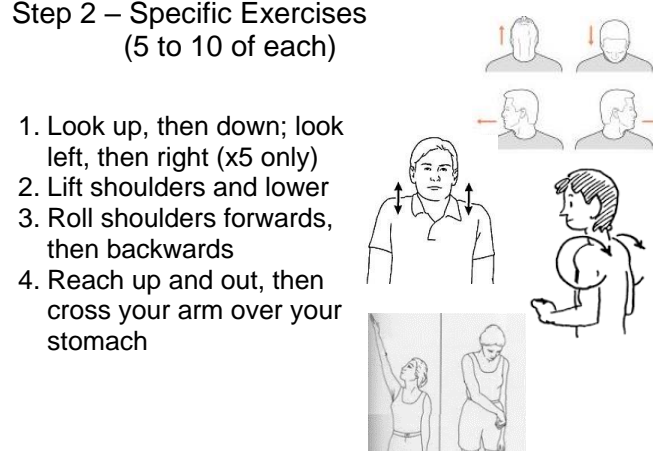
The start of SLD is very important and involves abdominal breathing:

- Place both hands on your stomach. Breathe in and feel your stomach rising (imagine a balloon inflating under your hands)
- Slowly breathe out and press gently inwards with your hands
- Repeat 3 times.



**Step 2 – Specific Exercises**  
(5 to 10 of each)

1. Look up, then down; look left, then right (x5 only)
2. Lift shoulders and lower
3. Roll shoulders forwards, then backwards
4. Reach up and out, then cross your arm over your stomach

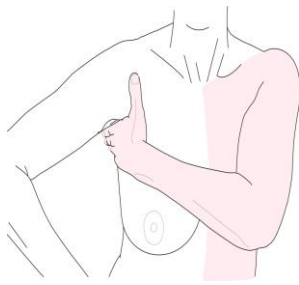


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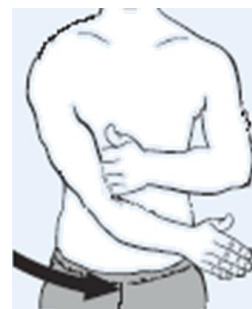
### Step 3 - Armpit

- Place your hand in your armpit
- Massage upwards into your armpit and release (10 times)
- Ensure the direction is always upwards
- Repeat on both sides



### Alternative Method for Step 3

- Place your hand in your armpit
- Cross the other arm across your body towards your opposite hip
- Repeat 10 times on both sides



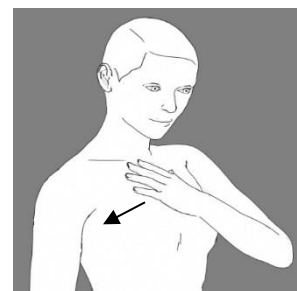
### Step 4 - Collarbones

- Place your index finger above, and your middle finger below your collarbone, so that the collarbone lies between these two fingers.
- Gently push downwards and release.
- Repeat 10 times on both sides



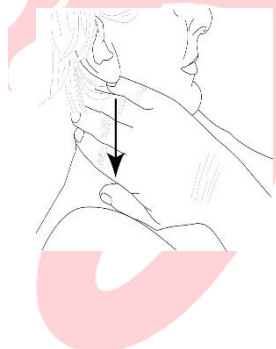
### Step 5 - Chest

- Using the flat part of your fingers, gently stroke downwards from your RIGHT collarbone to your right armpit. Now repeat on LEFT side.
- Repeat 10 times on both sides



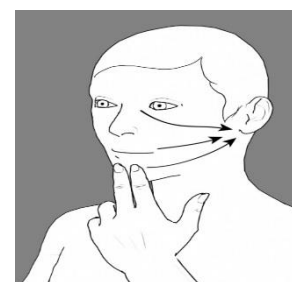
### Step 6 - Neck

- Place your hands on both sides of your neck below the ears
- Gently stroke the skin down towards your collarbones and release
- Repeat this movement 10 times



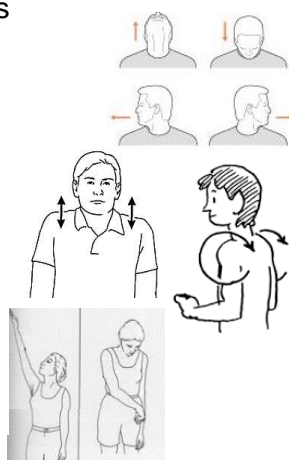
### Step 7 - Face

- Start at your chin and gently stroke your skin towards your ears and then down your neck towards your armpit
- Repeat 10 times
- Repeat across your face, starting next to your mouth and stroke towards your ears and then down towards the neck
- Repeat at nose level
- Repeat on both sides



### Step 8 – Specific Exercises (5 to 10 of each)

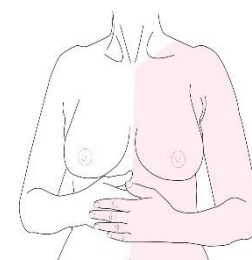
1. Look up, then down; look left, then right (x5 only)
2. Lift shoulders and lower
3. Roll shoulders forwards, then backwards
4. Reach up and out, then cross your arm over your stomach



### Step 9 – Breathing

The start of SLD is very important and involves abdominal breathing:

- Place both hands on your stomach. Breathe in and feel your stomach rising (imagine a balloon inflating under your hands)
- Slowly breathe out and press gently inwards with your hands
- Repeat 3 times.



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