

Physiotherapy after Head and Neck Surgery

Rehabilitation and Exercise Program

This handout outlines several physiotherapy exercises that may aid in the prevention of some post-operative complications and facilitate a short, healthy hospital stay. It also offers some general advice to follow upon discharge from hospital.

Neck and Shoulder Exercises

After an operation to your neck, chest, or shoulders you may develop pain and have limited movement. Pain can develop in your neck and shoulders for several reasons, including the following:

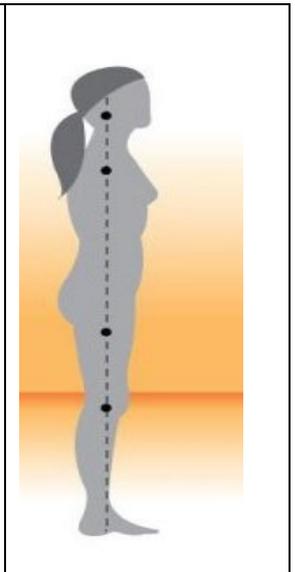
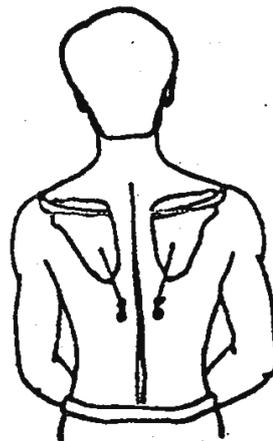
1. Tightness and swelling related to the surgery or other procedures (e.g. Radiation Therapy)
2. The presence of drains after the surgery
3. The removal or damage to nerves during the surgery

Positioning yourself well and performing gentle exercises can help alleviate pain and stiffness in your neck and shoulders after surgery.

POSTURE

To prevent muscle tightness and pain in the neck and chest it is important to be aware of your posture when you are sitting, standing and walking.

- stand or sit tall
- chin tucked in
- shoulders back and down away from your ears
- ensure you have 'set' your shoulder blades in the position shown before performing the exercises below



STRETCHES & EXERCISES

Whilst you have drains in your neck, try not to move your head, or turn your neck, and do not raise your arms above shoulder height.

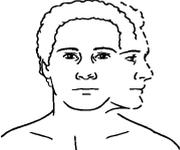
Only progress your exercises to full range after all your drains have been removed, as directed by your Physiotherapist.

Move slowly and gently until you feel a gentle stretch.

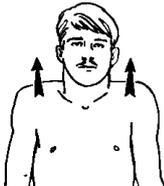
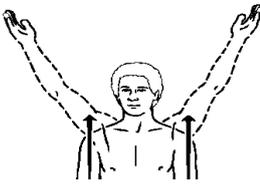
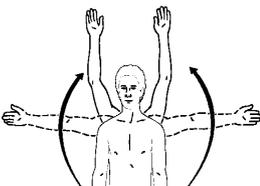
If the neck exercises make you feel nauseous or dizzy, stop and check with your physiotherapist before continuing.

NECK EXERCISES

Make sure you sit or stand with good posture when completing these exercises.

	<p>Look up to the ceiling and hold for 10-15 seconds.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- You may also stick your chin forwards to increase this stretch. <p>Look down to the floor and hold for 10-15 seconds.</p> <p><i>Repeat 5 times</i></p>
	<p>Keep your chest and shoulders still, facing forwards.</p> <p>Turn your head slowly to the right and hold for 10-15 seconds.</p> <p>Repeat on the left and hold for 10-15 seconds.</p> <p><i>Repeat 5 times</i></p>
	<p>Keep your chest and shoulders still, facing forwards.</p> <p>Lower your right ear towards your right shoulder and hold for 10-15 seconds.</p> <p>Repeat on the left and hold for 10-15 seconds.</p> <p><i>Repeat 5 times</i></p>
	<p>Keep your chest and shoulders still, facing forwards.</p> <p>Gently tuck your chin in, as though giving yourself a “double chin”.</p> <p>Hold 10 seconds.</p> <p><i>Repeat 10 times</i></p>

SHOULDER EXERCISES

	<p>With your arms resting by your sides, shrug your shoulders up and around in a circle and then relax again.</p> <p><i>Repeat 10 times in each direction</i></p>
	<p>Raise both arms in front of you and up above your head, as far as you can.</p> <p>Lower slowly back to your sides.</p> <p>You may do this exercise whilst lying down, initially.</p> <p><i>Repeat 10 times</i></p>
	<p>Raise both arms out to the side up above your head, as far as you can.</p> <p>Lower slowly back to your sides.</p> <p><i>Repeat 10 times</i></p>

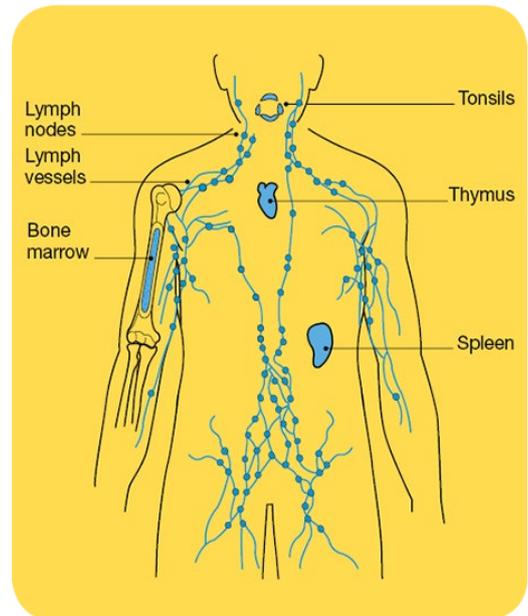
Lymphoedema

After surgery to your head, neck or shoulders there is a risk that lymphoedema may develop. The following information describes what lymphoedema is and provides some advice to follow.

(adapted from Cancer Council Australia, 2018)

What is lymphoedema?

- The **lymphatic system** is part of the immune system and helps to protect the body from disease, get rid of waste and drain fluid
- When the lymphatic system is not working properly, **fluid can build up** causing swelling
- **Persistent swelling** is called lymphoedema
- Cancer-related lymphoedema may occur following **surgery, chemotherapy or radiation therapy**
- Each person's risk of developing lymphoedema is different, depending on the **number of lymph nodes** removed and **types of treatment**



What does lymphoedema look like?

- Feelings of **tightness, heaviness or fullness** under your chin or in your face, neck or arm on the operated side.
- A **pocket** of firm tissue or swelling that may come and go throughout the day.
- **Heavy feeling** or **ache** in the face, jaw or neck.
- **Swelling** that comes and goes, or you notice it more at the **start** of the day.
- **Changes** to speech, phlegm, voice quality or swallowing ability.
- **Pitting** of the skin (when pressure leaves an indent in the skin).

Reducing lymphoedema risk

- **Exercise** and move regularly - start slowly and increase gradually.
- **Move** normally - this will keep the fluid flowing (including doing stretches).
- **Look after your skin** - keep it clean, moisturised, and protected from cuts and burns.
- Maintain a **healthy weight** - ask your doctor, if you need support.
- Seek urgent **medical help** if you notice redness, heat, pain or think you have an infection.

If you have specific questions, please discuss this with your doctor or physiotherapist.

Scar Management

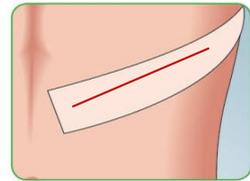
Your surgical incision will heal by forming a scar, which is permanent. A scar is a natural part of the healing process and initially it can be red, raised and thicker to touch. Most scars will heal very well in the first three months and need no further treatment. However, it may take 12-18 months for your scars to become flat and return to a more normal skin colour. No scar can ever be completely removed. You will always be able to see where the surgical scar was, but the appearance and mobility of the scar can be improved by the following ways.

1) Taping

Applying tape to the healing wound can assist with flattening of raised scars. **Micropore tape**, which is purchased from most pharmacies, can be applied directly to the wound immediately after the sutures are removed (at about 2 weeks after surgery).

For maximum benefit, micropore tape should be worn for 23 hours per day for up to 12 weeks after surgery. The tape can be removed prior to showering and then replaced after the wound has been thoroughly dried.

If you have any concerns regarding redness, itchiness or possible reaction to the tape, please remove, discontinue use, and discuss with your pharmacist about other types of tape available.



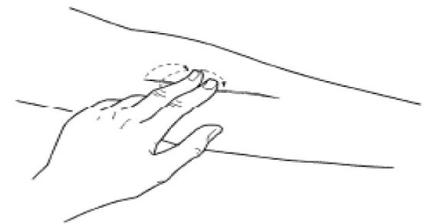
2) Massage

You can commence massaging your scar after

- your wound has completely healed (all scabs have fallen off)
- all stitches / sutures have been removed
- it is approximately 3-4 weeks after your surgery

Using firm but not painful pressure on the scar, move your thumb or fingers in a circular motion, to gradually massage moving along the entire length of the scar. Pay particular attention to any areas of the scar that feel raised or stuck down.

This massage can be repeated 3 to 5 times per day and should be done before applying a moisturising cream (such as sorbolene or aqueous cream).



3) Silicone gels or sheets

If the scar continues to be raised, red and not flexible with the use of taping and scar massage, please ask your physiotherapist or Pharmacist about the use of silicone products to assist with improving your scar's function and appearance.



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