

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Exercises and advice following head and neck surgery

This booklet contains information to help you recover following your head and neck surgery.

It offers advice on how to help prevent complications, such as neck and shoulder stiffness, with exercises, relaxation and some general points. Exercises are an important part of your recovery following surgery and/or radiotherapy.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact the Oncology therapy team on **telephone 01623 672384 between 8am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday.**

Depending on the type of surgery you have, you may be referred by your specialist cancer nurse to physiotherapy.

Before your operation

Try to stop smoking

Stopping smoking will reduce the risk of complications before and after surgery, improve your skin's healing ability and your long term health.

At the back of this leaflet you will find the contact details for Smoke Free Life, who can offer support and advice.

Consider becoming more active and preparing yourself for your treatments by:

- **Exercising**

Evidence suggests that exercise is safe and feasible in the weeks prior to surgery and during chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

- **Eating a healthy diet**

A healthy diet contains a variety of foods, including fresh fruit and vegetables, starchy foods (such as rice, pasta and potatoes) and some protein-rich foods (such as meat, fish, eggs, lentils and beans). A healthy diet is also low in fat (especially saturated fats), salt and sugar and limits alcohol consumption.

What are the benefits?

- A better response to treatment.
- Recovering more quickly.
- Fewer problems during and after treatment.
- Reduced anxiety and improved mood
- Improved energy levels.
- Lower chance of cancer recurrence.
- Improve your general fitness and other health conditions.
- Be able to do your normal activities.

After your operation

Deep breathing

This helps reduce the effect of the anaesthetic. It can also help you relax, reduce feelings of sickness and relieve pain.

Try the following breathing exercise for at least the first few days after your operation:

- Sit up in your bed/chair.
- Take a deep breath in through your nose, then sigh gently out, relaxing your shoulders.
- If you feel 'chesty' take a few deep breathes then 'huff', squeezing the air out quickly through your mouth using your stomach muscles.

- The huff must be long enough to move mucus, but not to make you have a coughing bout.
- Aim to repeat this hourly.

Foot and ankle circulatory exercises

To reduce the risk of developing a blood clot in your legs it is important to do the following:

- Circle both ankles about 10 times one way and then the other.
- Bend your ankles towards you and then point your feet away about 10 times.
- Continue with these exercises until you are up and about as normal.

Exercise

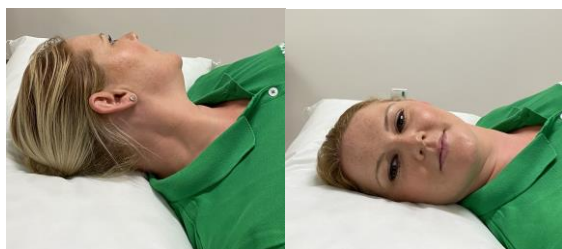
After your surgery it is important to regularly exercise to:

- Prevent your neck, shoulder and arm joints getting stiff.
- Prevent joint and soft tissue stiffness, particularly if you are going on to have radiotherapy treatment.
- Help the wound to heal and become flexible.
- Reduce the risk of lymphoedema swelling caused by a build-up of lymph fluid.
- Regain movement and improve your posture.

Neck exercises

These exercises should be performed **three times a day**. Try to repeat each exercise **five times** but stop if you become dizzy.

Neck rotations:



- Lie on your back with one pillow supporting your head.

- Slowly turn your head to one side until you feel a gentle stretch on the opposite side.
- Hold for a count of 2.
- Return to starting position.
- Repeat on the opposite side.
- To progress, use the opposite hand on the side of the face to provide a gentle stretch.

Neck side flexion:



- Lie on your back with one pillow supporting your head.
- Tilt your head to one side so that you are bringing your ear nearer to the tip of your shoulder:
 - Hold for a count of two.
 - Return to starting position.
 - Repeat on the opposite side.
 - To progress, use the opposite hand to gently apply pressure to your head and add a stretch.

Neck extension/flexion:



- Sit upright.
- Slowly take your head backwards. Support your head with your hand if you find this more comfortable.
- Return to the starting position.
- Slowly take your head forward to bring your chin towards your chest.
- Return to starting position.

- To progress, place your hands at the back of your head and gently add pressure when tilting your head down.

Shoulder shrug and rolls:



- Sit upright with your arms relaxed.
- Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears.
- Hold for a count of 2.
- Slowly return to starting position.

Shoulder circling:

- Sit upright with your arms relaxed.
- Circle your shoulders backwards then downwards.
- Return to starting position.

Arm lifts:



- Lie on your back with one pillow supporting your head, and put your arms by your sides.
- Holding your hands, lift your arms above your head, keeping the elbow straight.
- Go as far as you can until you feel a gentle stretch.
- Hold up to 10 seconds.
- Return to starting position.

Shoulder rotation:



- Lie on your back with one pillow supporting your head.
- Clasp your hands behind your neck and point your elbows to the ceiling.
- Ensure your head remains on the pillow.
- Stretch your elbows to the side, trying to touch the bed or floor with them.
- Hold for a count of 10.
- Return to starting position.

Shoulder blade squeezes:



- Sit upright with your arms out to the side.
- Squeeze your shoulder blades together.
- Hold for a count of five.
- Relax.

Continuing your exercises

After your surgery the scar will tend to become thicker and tighter as it heals.

It is important that you continue to gently stretch your head and neck to maintain movement.

If you go on to have radiotherapy to your neck area, you should carry on with your neck and shoulder stretches during your radiotherapy treatment **and continue them indefinitely afterwards**. This will help to reduce any tissue tightness, which can cause neck and shoulder stiffness at a later date.

If you feel you are not progressing with the exercises or that you are having problems with your shoulder or neck, please contact your clinical nurse specialist or consultant who can refer you to the physiotherapy department.

General advice and information

Following your surgery you may experience changes in sensation around your scar (e.g. numbness, tingling, or extra sensitivity to touch). These sensations are common and often subside a few months after your surgery. Gentle massage or tapping around the area may ease the discomfort and help restore normal sensation. However, you may be left with some lasting numbness.

Returning to activities

Lifting and household activities

For the first 4-6 weeks after your operation, only lift light objects with your arms, e.g. a light shopping bag or kettle. Avoid heavy or repetitive tasks that may strain your neck or shoulder such as window cleaning or vacuuming.

After 4-6 weeks your operation scar will be well healed, and you can **gradually** increase the amount you are doing.

Driving

It is sensible not to drive until after your first outpatient clinic appointment following your operation.

Resume driving only when you are able to move freely, perform an emergency stop, concentrate sufficiently and tolerate the pressure of the seat belt over your wound. When you do start, initially go for short trips and gradually increase the distance, as you feel able.

Check that your insurance is valid after major surgery.

Sport/leisure

Most leisure and sporting activities can be restarted after two months. Please contact your cancer nurse specialist, consultant or physiotherapist if you require specific advice about your particular sport or hobby.

Returning to work

When you return to work will depend on what your job involves. Your consultant, cancer nurse specialist or physiotherapist will be pleased to discuss your work with you and give you more specific advice.

Looking after your scar

Scars mainly 'form' over the first 2-3 months.

It is important over this time to encourage them to be flexible enough to allow you to use your upper body as you did before surgery. One way of doing this is to do the regular exercises shown to you; another is to gently massage the scar.

How should I massage my scar?

Once your wound has fully healed, has no scabs and no sign of infection (normally 3-4 weeks), you can start to massage it.

Use a moisturiser, such as E45, available from chemists or on prescription.

Gently and lightly massage over your scar with small circular movements for about 5 minutes, once or twice a day, ideally after a bath or shower.

This will also help to soften/flatten the scar and make it less sensitive.

How long should I massage the scar?

Continue for a minimum of 3 months after your surgery, ideally for 2 years as scars can change their shape and continue to tighten for several years.

The longer you do it for the better the results will be both in terms of scar flexibility and how it looks cosmetically. As your scar will be sensitive to sunlight for several years, a high factor sun cream is recommended.

Keeping well

Because of your surgery/treatment you may now be more aware of your body and how it works.

Right now is a really good time to build on the knowledge you've gained and make small changes to your lifestyle that can prevent you from experiencing certain health problems in the future. You can do this by:

- **Maintaining good posture**

Try to maintain a good posture when sitting/walking to allow your wounds to heal to the correct length - it may help to sit with a rolled up towel in the small of your back.

When standing, think about 'growing tall'; imagine somebody pulling the top of your head with a piece of string.

- **Exercising**

There is much evidence to show that simple activity can significantly help prevent cancer recurrence and also other long-term illnesses, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, kidney disease, type 2 diabetes and stroke.

Cancer and its treatments can cause physical changes and dealing with these is often stressful.

Being more physically active can help you cope with and recover from some of these changes.

Being active during and after treatment can:

- Reduce fatigue.
- Reduce stress and anxiety.
- Help look after your bones.
- Help look after your heart.
- Help reduce your risk of getting a blood clot.
- Help keep your weight healthy.
- Relieve pain.

During treatment, you'll be the best judge of how much activity you can manage, whether that's trying to reduce the amount of time you spend resting, or starting with going for a walk.

Walking is an ideal exercise as it is free, you can do it while socialising and you can gradually increase the distance.

Regular physical activity can help ease pain in your joints by building your muscle strength, improving your flexibility and encouraging your body to release endorphins, which are the body's natural painkillers.

How much physical activity is recommended?

In the UK adults are advised to do at least 2.5 hours of moderate intensity physical activity a week. This could be 30 minutes of activity on 5 days of the week, which could be broken up into 10 minutes of activity 3 times a day.

Keep a routine

Try to get up at a normal time in the morning, get dressed and move about. If you get tired, aim to rest later.

Family and Friends

Family and friends can help you with important things such as:

- Practical help with the tasks you might temporarily be unable to do while you recover.

- Emotional support – talking to your family and friends about how you feel and sharing your concerns.

What if I'm feeling anxious, worried or stressed?

It is normal to feel this way before, during and after treatment. You may find it beneficial to practice some relaxation techniques to help control these symptoms

Mini relaxation exercise:

- Stop what you are doing and close your eyes if you feel comfortable.
- Take a slow deep breath in through your nose.
- Think the word 'RELAX'.
- Gently exhale by sighing out your mouth, continue to think 'RELAX', as you do, imagining feelings of heaviness leaving your body.
- Repeat steps 2-4 above 5 more times.
- Hold the feeling of relaxation for 30 seconds.

You can find more relaxation exercises and advice through the Sherwood Forest Hospital's Clinical Psychology web pages. Either click on the link below or copy and paste into your browser:

<https://www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk/our-services/clinical-psychology-cancer-service/>

Useful numbers:

- **Lymphoedema Support Network**
Helpline: 020 7351 4480
Website: <https://www.lymphoedema.org/>
- **Macmillan Cancer Support**
Helpline: 0808 8080 000
Website: www.macmillan.org.uk
- **Smoking Cessation**
Smoke free life, Nottinghamshire
Telephone: 08002465343
0115 7722515
Or text QUIT to 66777

Website:

www.smokefreelifenottinghamshire.co.uk

- **Maggie's Centre**

Telephone: 0115 924 6210

Website:

www.maggiescentres.org/our-centres/maggies-nottingham

Further sources of information

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

Patient Experience Team (PET)

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service.

King's Mill Hospital: 01623 672222

Newark Hospital: 01636 685692

Email: sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net.

This document is intended for information purposes only and should not replace advice that your relevant health professional would give you. External websites may be referred to in specific cases. Any external websites are provided for your information and convenience. We cannot accept responsibility for the information found on them. If you require a full list of references for this leaflet (if relevant) please email sfh-tr.patientinformation@nhs.net or telephone 01623 622515, extension 6927.

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