



PATIENT INFORMATION

Head and neck lymphoedema

What is lymphoedema?

Lymphoedema is a swelling (oedema) in the tissues, which happens when lymph fluid cannot drain away. Some people develop lymphoedema if they have lymph glands removed during surgery or have had radiotherapy. Many people experience no problem at all but some develop a swelling known as lymphoedema.

This may occur immediately after treatment or many years later.

The purpose of this leaflet is to give you information about what lymphoedema is, what you can do to help prevent it and what help you can get if you develop this condition.

The lymphatic system

In order to understand lymphoedema you need to know a little bit about the lymphatic system.

The lymphatic system is a network of vessels (tubes) and nodes (glands) that cover the body and drain fluid from the tissues into the blood stream. The lymph vessels collect extra fluid, protein and waste material from the body tissues and transport it via the lymph nodes back into the blood. The lymph nodes filter the fluid of any unwanted material and make special cells that help the body fight infection.

What should I look out for?

- A feeling of fullness or pressure in the face or neck
- The sensation of swelling which is often present even before the swelling is seen.
- Puffiness, swelling or any increase in the size of your head, face or neck
- A bursting sensation.
- Aching, heaviness or tightness

There are several reasons other than lymphoedema that may cause swelling.

If you notice any of the signs listed above contact your Specialist Nurse, Consultant or GP who can refer you the specialist lymphoedema team.

The team will invite you to attend an outpatient's clinic where they will assess your problem and devise a plan of treatment to meet your individual needs.

What treatments are there?

- Treatment with lymphoedema taping techniques
- Massage with a therapist and self-management techniques
- Exercise regimes taught by a specialist physiotherapist
- Compression garments
- Lifestyle advice
- Upper body exercises

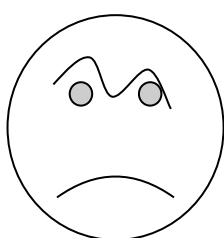
What can I do to help prevent lymphoedema?

Exercise increases muscle pump activity which helps drain the fluid and reduce any swelling.

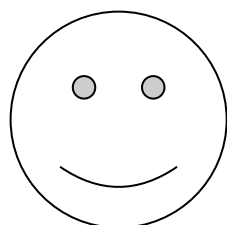
Exercises should be done at least twice a day.

The muscles in the face head and neck are small but they can play an important role in helping to reduce any swelling.

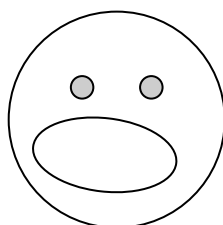
Any facial expression makes the muscles work so do exaggerated facial expressions like:



Frowning



Smiling



Yawning

Do these repeatedly throughout the day. You may feel a bit silly doing these in front of people to start with so do them on your own if you need to. You may also find chewing useful and this can be another exercise that you can do in front of anyone. Always use sugar free chewing gum.

Important advice

- **Try not to wear tight clothes around your neck e.g. collars or ties**
- **Infections can make lymphoedema worse, so it is helpful if any infections in the head and neck area are treated quickly**
- **Sleep on a few pillows, as this will help natural drainage.**
- **Heat can increase swelling so:**
 - **On sunny days stay in the shade, wear a hat and use high factor sunscreen**
 - **Avoid very hot baths or showers and saunas.**

Contacts:

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Macmillan Cancer Support ☎ 0808 808 00 00 www.macmillan.org.uk

Lymphoedema Support Network ☎ 020 7351 4480 www.lymphoedema.org/lisn

Manual Lymphatic Drainage UK ☎ 01592 748008 www.mlduk.org.uk