

Patient Information and Advice on Lymphoedema Risk Reduction and Management

A Regional Guide for Head & Neck Cancer Patients

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Lymphoedema is not well documented and is more common than the medical profession generally realise. There are no New Zealand statistics, however lymphoedema is reported to affect an estimated 500 million people worldwide and around 2 in 1000 of the population in the UK.

The Lymphatic System

Lymph is a colourless fluid, which forms in the body. It normally drains back into the blood circulation through a network of vessels and nodes. Lymph nodes act as filter stations and they play an important part in the body's defence against infection, by removing excess protein, dead or abnormal cells and bacteria.

Why Does Lymphoedema Occur?

If the drainage routes through the lymphatic system become blocked or damaged, lymph accumulates in the tissues and swelling (oedema) occurs. Unlike other oedemas, Lymphoedema can lead to changes in the tissue such as fibrosis (hardness) and an increased risk of infection. The swelling can then become even more difficult to control.

Primary Lymphoedema

This is usually determined from birth and may be due to underdevelopment of the lymphatic system. It can affect anyone at any age.

Secondary Lymphoedema

This can occur in the treatment of cancer following surgery or radiotherapy. It can also occur as a result of infections, skin conditions, burns or any other trauma.

If you have been diagnosed with Lymphoedema then it is important to follow the instructions given to you, which may include the following:

Skin Care

- You should moisturise your face, neck and chest daily with an unperfumed and lanolin free cream and not a lotion. Ask your therapist for further details.
- Special care should be taken when shaving. An electric shaver is recommended. This is to avoid cutting the skin, which would make it more vulnerable to infection.

Compression Garments

- Compression garments may be provided for your use. Please follow the instructions provided by your therapist.
- Garments need to be washed regularly, and should be replaced every 6 months. If your head or neck becomes increasingly painful or discoloured when wearing your garment then remove immediately and seek medical advice.

Exercises

Regular 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.

The following exercises should not cause you any pain or discomfort. Your Lymphoedema physiotherapist/therapist will tell you which exercises to do. Do the exercises slowly and rhythmically.

Posture

It is important to maintain a good posture both during and between exercises.

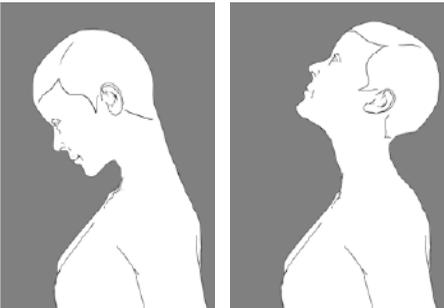
Exercise 1:



Very gently move your head to the left and then to the right.

Repeat 5 times, once a day.

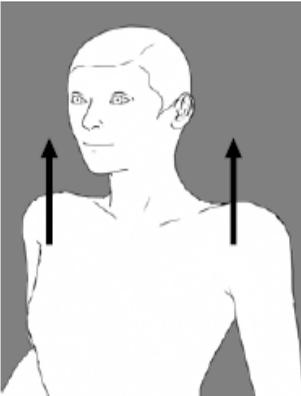
Exercise 2:



Now slowly look up, and then look down.

Repeat 5 times, once a day.

Exercise 3:



Shrug your shoulders 5 times.

Repeat 5 times, once a day

Roll your shoulders backwards.

Repeat 5 times, once a day.

Exercise 4:



Slowly scrunch up your eyes and feel your face tightening.
Hold and relax.

Repeat 5 times, once a day.

Exercise 5:



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

Repeat 5 times, once a day.

Exercise 6:



A nice and easy one to end!!
Smile!
Go on, really show your teeth!
Feel the tension and then relax.

Repeat 5 times, once a day.

Simple Lymph Drainage

Simple Lymph Drainage (SLD) is a very simple massage technique, which is used to stimulate the undamaged lymphatics. This encourages them to work more effectively, directing the flow of lymph from the swollen area towards the healthy lymph nodes.

The massage technique needs to be done at least once a day and should take you around 10 - 15 minutes.

How to Massage

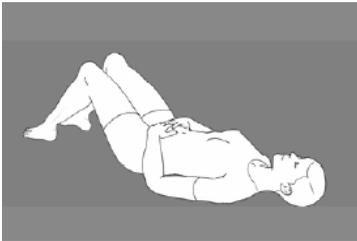
The massage should be done very slowly and gently. It is best not to use any oil or cream, but if your hands feel sticky, try corn flour. **If there is any redness on your skin your pressure is too heavy.**

The massage technique should be applied when you are either sitting comfortably or lying down. **Do not rush!**

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

Follow these steps in order: -

STEP 1:



The start of SLD is very important and involves diaphragmatic breathing.

Place both hands on your stomach; breathe in deeply and slowly through your nose. You should feel your tummy rising into your hands.

Breathe out slowly through your mouth.

Repeat this 3 times.

Relax for a few minutes before getting up.

STEP 2:



Place your **Left** hand in your **right** armpit.

Move your hand up and out with a scooping movement. Release the pressure and let the elasticity of the skin take your hand back to the starting position.

Repeat 10 times on both sides.

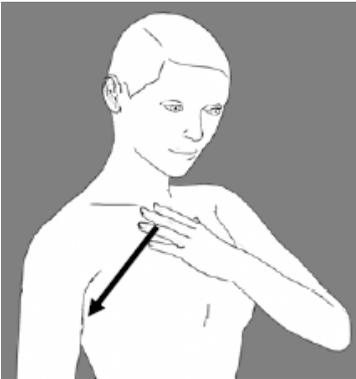
STEP 3:



Place your index finger above, and your middle finger below your collarbone, so that the collarbone lies between your fingers. Gently push downwards and release.

Repeat 10 times on both sides.

STEP 4:

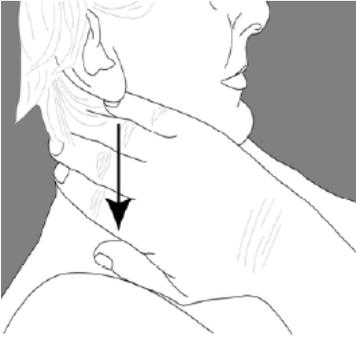


Using the flat part of your fingers, gently stroke downwards from your **right** collarbone to your **right** armpit.

Repeat 10 times.

Repeat on the **right** side.

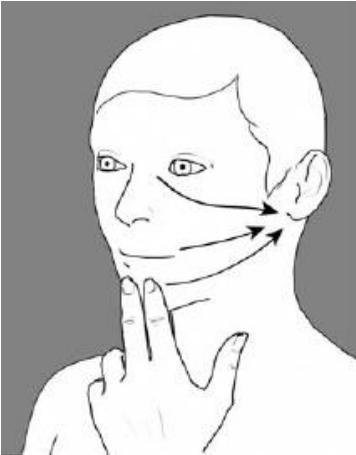
STEP 5:



Place your hand on the **right** side of your neck just below your **right** earlobe. Using the flat part of your fingers, gently stroke in a downwards motion.

Repeat 10 times.
Repeat on **left** side.

STEP 6:



Start at your chin and gently stroke your skin towards your ears.

Repeat 10 times.

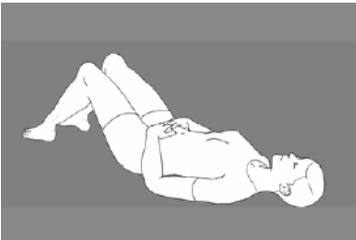
Repeat across your face, starting next to your mouth and stroke towards your ears.

Repeat at nose level.

If necessary, repeat across your forehead.

Repeat on **both** sides.

STEP 7:



Place both hands on your stomach; breathe in deeply and slowly through your nose. You should feel your tummy rising into your hands.

Breathe out slowly through your mouth.

Repeat this 3 times.

Relax for a few minutes before getting up.

General Recommendations

1. Try to use your facial muscles as normally as possible, as muscular activity improves lymph drainage. Avoid over exertion which may increase swelling. If your therapist has provided a compression garment make sure you are wearing your compression garment when you exercise.
2. It is important to achieve and maintain a healthy weight
3. Skincare reduces the risk of infection.
4. Seek medical advice before travelling particularly before air travel as this can cause increased swelling. You may need to take a precautionary dose of antibiotics with you.

Follow These Precautions!

Infections

With damaged or blocked lymph drainage, you are at risk of infections (known as Cellulitis) in the affected areas.

To help prevent this:

AVOID	USE
Cuts/Scratches	Protective clothing
Razors, Waxing, Electrolysis	Electric shavers
Insect Bites	Insect repellents
Tight Restrictive Clothing	Loose collars
Sunburn	High protection cream e.g. SPF 30

Injuries

Treat even the smallest cuts and grazes. Follow these steps:

1. Clean the area well with water and apply an antiseptic.
2. Cover with sterile dressing.
3. If the area becomes red, hot and painful, then you may have an infection. Seek medical advice and discontinue any compression until advised by your Lymphoedema physiotherapist/therapist.

Trauma

Any trauma/injury to the affected area will increase your risk of infection and further swelling.

If you think you have an infection i.e. you feel generally unwell or have signs of redness, tenderness, or increase in temperature, seek medical attention immediately for antibiotic treatment.

For antibiotic guideline please refer to:

- **Australasian Lymphology Association (ALA) Consensus guideline: Management of Cellulitis in Lymphoedema.**
- **British Lymphology Society (BLS) Consensus document on the Management of Cellulitis in Lymphoedema.**