



Oxford University Hospitals  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Trans-Oral Laser Surgery

Information for patients



Oxford Centre for  
Head and Neck Oncology

## **Introduction**

This booklet has been written by members of the Head and Neck Oncology team as a guide if you are having trans-oral laser surgery. It answers those questions most frequently asked by patients.

This information is only a guide; your healthcare team will be able to give you more detailed information as and when you need it.

We hope you and your family will find the information both reassuring and supportive.

## **What is a laser?**

A laser is a high power beam of light. It can be used in different ways as a surgical tool. The surgeons use a laser attached to a microscope to remove tissue, instead of using a scalpel (surgical knife).

## **What does trans-oral mean?**

Trans-oral means 'through the mouth'. Using this route of entry means that we don't have to make any cuts or scars on the outside of your body.

## **How long will the procedure take?**

How long the procedure will take will depend on the size of your tumour and where it is located.

## What are the side effects of trans-oral laser surgery?

- **Pain:** Immediately after the operation you may not feel much pain because the laser seals off nerves, causing numbness. The nerves start to work again over the next 24-48 hours and then the feeling returns to the tissues. You may start to feel some pain at this time.

You will be given painkillers by mouth or through a drip in your arm to help keep you pain free. Your pain may be moderate to severe but will be monitored closely so that we can keep on top of it with painkillers.

- **Bleeding:** Sometimes the area can bleed after the surgery but you will be closely watched for this while you are in hospital. The team will advise you on what to do if you start bleeding after you are discharged home.
- **Speech and swallowing difficulties:** These are likely to occur if the laser treatment involves any part of your mouth or throat. If you experience any difficulties with your speech or swallowing, you will be referred to a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT).

## **Will I be able to eat and drink after the operation?**

This depends on where you have had your treatment and the area that has been treated. It may be difficult to eat and drink for a while after the operation while the tissues are healing. You may need to be fed through a tube during this time, your surgical team will discuss this with you if this is likely to be required.

Laser surgery can often result in swallowing difficulties. You may be seen by the SLT team before you start to eat and drink. Your surgeon may set limitations of what you can eat in accordance with how you are healing, and the SLT team will make a recommendation based on their assessment of your swallowing ability.

If required the SLT team can provide specific exercises for speech or swallowing.

## **How will I know that I am getting the right amount of nourishment?**

Getting enough food and drink is important for wound healing and energy levels. If you are not managing to eat what would be normal quantities for you, please let your ward nurse or Head and Neck Cancer Specialist Nurse know so they can consider a referral to the Dietitian.

If you are under the care of a Dietitian they may suggest a regular intake of oral nutritional supplements. These are high-energy, high-protein enriched drinks. If you are advised to take these after your surgery, you will be given guidance on which product and what quantity to take. If you need these beyond your inpatient stay, you will be provided with a supply to go home with, and the Dietitian will discuss with you regarding ongoing supplies as required.

If you do not require the above oral nutritional supplements but are not eating full meals, or feel you need a top up, you can buy some oral nutritional supplements from a chemist or supermarket or alternatively, have homemade nourishing drinks. The leaflet 'Nourishing drinks recipes' is available for further ideas. Please ask one of the Head and Neck Team for a copy.

## **Will I need a feeding tube?**

If the laser surgery is likely to affect your swallowing it may be necessary for you to have a feeding tube after the operation. This will likely be a nasogastric tube; a feeding tube that is passed through your nose and into your stomach.

A liquid feed designed to meet your nutritional needs will be given to you through the feeding tube.

A feeding tube will not interfere with your ability to eat and drink by mouth. The tube will be removed when you are ready to eat and drink enough to maintain or gain weight, and your swallow is deemed safe.

## **Will it affect my speech?**

Your speech may be affected by swelling and discomfort, depending on which parts of your mouth and throat have been treated by laser. This usually resolves with some time, over the course of 4-8 weeks after surgery.

You may be given exercises to improve your speech and your voice.

If you have laser treatment to your voice box area, we will recommend that you have a short period of voice rest in order to allow the area to heal.

'Voice rest' can mean total rest of your voice for a few days (including whispering), or a period of time where you do not speak loudly, for long periods at a time, against background noise. Your SLT will be able to provide more specific information regarding this, depending on the site and size of the tumour.

## **Pain control at home**

If you experience pain once you are home that is negatively affecting your food and drink intake, please take your painkillers as prescribed. If these are not sufficient, please speak to your GP for help regarding this.

The information in this leaflet is for guidance only and does not replace personalised advice given to you by a member of our team.

## **How to contact us / further information**

If you have any questions or concerns, or need any further information, please contact your GP or telephone:

### **Head and Neck Cancer Specialist Nurses**

Tel: **01865 234 346**

Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 4.00pm

### **Speech and Language Therapists**

Tel: **01865 231 205**

Monday to Friday 8.30am to 4.30pm (voicemail available)

Email: **[Headand.neckSLT@ouh.nhs.uk](mailto:Headand.neckSLT@ouh.nhs.uk)**  
(checked throughout the week)

## Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

Author: Compiled by Head & Neck Oncology team and staff,  
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