



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Physiotherapy Exercises and Advice Following Neck Dissection Surgery

Information for patients



Who is this leaflet for?

This information booklet contains physiotherapy exercises and advice for people who have had neck dissection surgery.

Why exercise?

The following exercises are designed to help prevent stiffness and discomfort in your neck and shoulders after neck dissection surgery.

The exercises should be done slowly and gently. Do not force the movements. They should not be painful, but it is normal to feel a stretching sensation. If you experience pain, please stop, and discuss this with your physiotherapist, specialist nurse or doctor.

Damage to the spinal accessory nerve

The spinal accessory nerve is a nerve in your neck which is important for shoulder movement. Sometimes this nerve can become stretched or bruised during the surgery which can cause the large muscle on the back of your neck and shoulder, called the trapezius muscle, to become weak. If this happens, your shoulder may feel achy and stiff, and it can be difficult to lift your arm above shoulder height. Damage to your nerve may be temporary or permanent. Your surgeon and/or physiotherapist will be able to explain how this may affect you, depending on your individual surgery. If the damage is temporary, recovery may still take up to a year or more to fully recover. Physiotherapy is recommended to help prevent stiffness and strengthen the muscles around your shoulder.

Which exercises and how often?

After your surgery, you will be seen by a physiotherapist on the ward for an assessment of your neck and shoulder movement and strength. This usually will happen once all the drains in your neck have been removed. Your physiotherapist will guide you on which exercises are best for you to complete and when to start them, as well as provide you with exercise bands if needed.

Your physiotherapist may recommend that you are referred for follow up physiotherapy after you leave hospital. This will be discussed with you during your assessment.

The exercises are most effective when carried out little and often throughout the day. You should aim to complete 5 repetitions of each exercise, 3 to 5 times per day unless advised differently by your physiotherapist. It can be helpful to try to incorporate your exercises into your daily routine by associating exercises with tasks you complete regularly. For example, if you regularly make cups of tea or coffee, you may wish to complete an exercise each time you wait for the kettle to boil.

You should continue these exercises for at least 3 months after your surgery. If you are having radiotherapy treatment after surgery, it is important to continue to complete your exercises throughout and after your treatment, to help prevent further tightness in your neck and shoulders.

If you have any questions about any of the exercises, please speak with a member of the physiotherapy team.

Posture

It is important to maintain a good posture throughout the day. To do this, you should try to:

- Keep your shoulders back and relaxed.
- Keep your head in line with your neck and shoulders.

To achieve a good posture, sometimes it can be helpful to imagine you have a piece of string attached to the top of your head and it is being pulled up gently towards the ceiling. This is also the starting position for your exercises.



Neck exercises

Repeat each exercise 5 times and aim to exercise 3 to 5 times per day. Hold each position for up to 5 seconds.

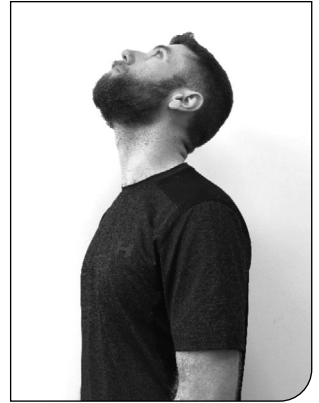
Flexion (Looking down)

- Tilt your head down, tucking your chin to your chest.
- Hold this position for 3 to 5 seconds and then return to the starting position.



Extension (Looking up)

- Tilt your head back, pointing your chin towards the ceiling.
- Keep your lips closed.
- Hold this position for 3 to 5 seconds and then return to the starting position.



Side flexion (Tilt head)

- Tilt your head to the side as if you are trying to touch your ear to your shoulder.
- Keep your shoulders relaxed throughout this exercise.
- Hold this position for 3 to 5 seconds and then return to the starting position.
- Repeat to both sides.



Rotation (Turn head)

- Turn your head to the side as if you are trying to look over your shoulder.
- Hold this position for 3 to 5 seconds and then return to the starting position.
- Repeat to both sides.



Shoulder exercises

Repeat each exercise 5 times and aim to exercise 3 to 5 times per day. Hold each position for up to 5 seconds.

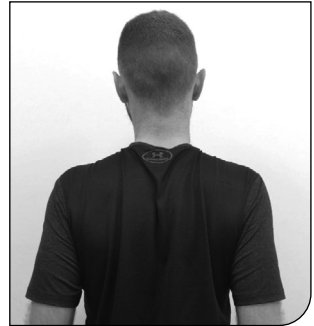
Elevation (Shoulder shrug)

- Lift your shoulders up towards your ears as far as you can.
- Try to keep your shoulders level with each other.
- Hold this position for 5 seconds and then return to the starting position.
- If you are completing this exercise standing up, you may find it helpful to perform this exercise in front of a mirror.
- Your physiotherapist may advise you to complete this exercise lying down.



Scapula retraction (Shoulder blade squeeze)

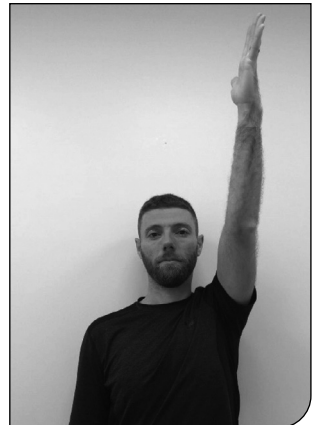
- Squeeze your shoulder blades together.
- Hold this position for 5 seconds and then return to the starting position.



Standing shoulder flexion (Forward arm lift)

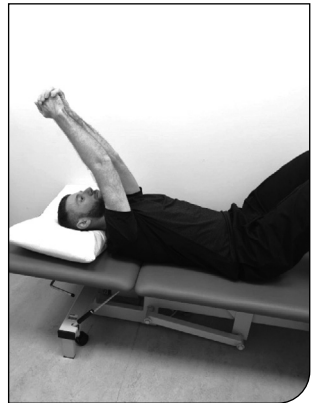
- Start with your arm by your side, with your elbow straight and palm facing your body.
- Lift your arm out in front of you as far as you can.
- Try to lift your arm above your head.
- Return to the starting position.

Your physiotherapist may advise you to complete this exercise lying down.



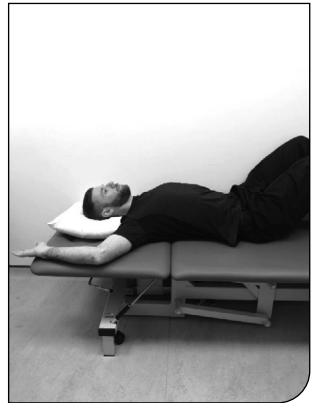
Lying shoulder flexion (Forward arm lift)

- Lie on your back with your fingers linked in front of you and your elbows straight.
- Lift your arms up above your head.



Lying shoulder abduction (Side arm lift)

- Lie on your back with your arm by your side and palm facing the ceiling.
- Take your arm out to the side and above your head.
- Try to keep your arm against the bed throughout the movement.



Isometric flexion (Shoulder strengthening)

- This exercise will strengthen the muscles on the front of your shoulder.
- Stand facing a wall.
- Keep your arm close to your side and elbow bent to 90 degrees.
- Push your fist against the wall but do not let your arm move.
- Hold for 5 seconds and then relax.



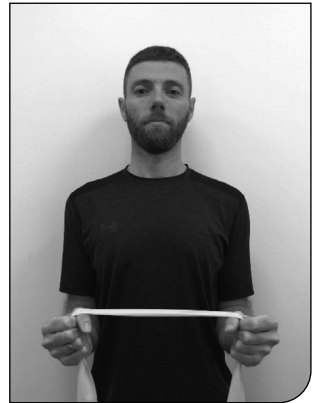
Isometric abduction (Shoulder strengthening)

- This exercise will strengthen the muscles on the side of your shoulder.
- Stand with your forearm against a wall and your below bent to 90 degrees.
- Push your forearm against the wall but do not let your arm move.
- Hold for 5 seconds and then relax.



Scapula control (Shoulder strengthening)

- This exercise will strengthen the muscles on the back of your shoulder.
- Stand with your head up and shoulder blades positioned back and down.
- Hold the middle of the band shoulder width apart, with slight tension in the band.
- Bend your elbows to 90 degrees and tuck them into your sides. Your forearms should be parallel to the ground.
- Pull the ends of the band outward a small amount.
- Hold for 5 seconds and slowly relax.
- This only needs to be a small movement.
- It is important to focus on your posture throughout this exercise.



Aim to complete 5 initially and build up as you feel able to. This exercise is about quality not quantity.

General Advice

Arm Support:

If you sit or stand for long periods with your arm unsupported, you may find that your shoulder begins to tire and ache.

The following tips may help to reduce discomfort:

- When sitting, use a chair with good back support and arm rests to allow you to support your shoulder.
- It can be helpful to lie down occasionally throughout the day to give your neck and shoulder muscles time to rest and relax.
- Put your hand on your hip, or in your pocket if standing for longer periods of time.
- If you like reading, rest your book on a desk, instead of holding it out in front of you.
- Avoid heavy lifting (anything more than 1kg) for 6 months after your surgery unless advised otherwise by your physiotherapist or surgeon.

Scar massage

As your wound heals, scar tissue will form. Your scar may feel tender, itchy and/or numb initially. This is part of the normal healing process. As your scar heals, the scar tissue can attach to the skin and muscles around it which can make the scar sensitive, painful, or raised. This is referred to as an adhesion. Scar tissue massage can help to reduce adhesions. You should start scar massage once your scar is fully healed. This means there are no open, red, or scabbed areas. Check with your physiotherapist or surgeon before you begin if you have any concerns.

How to complete scar massage:

- Wash your hands.
- Use a gentle non-perfumed cream or moisturiser to massage the scar with your thumb or one or two fingers.
- Use circular, up and down and sideways motions with firm pressure.
- Perform massage slowly, allowing tissues to stretch.
- Do not just slide over the skin.

Aim to complete 10 minutes of scar massage, 2 to 3 times per day.

Returning to normal activities

Exercise

It is important to keep as active as you can after your surgery alongside your physiotherapy exercises. You should return to exercise gradually and aim to complete 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise a week as per NHS physical activity recommendations. This can be broken down to 30 minutes per day, 5 days a week. Moderate intensity means any exercise that raises your heart rate, makes you breathe faster and feel warmer. You should be able to speak comfortably when you are exercising at a moderate intensity. Improving your fitness could be achieved through simple changes to your routine, such as increasing the speed and frequency of walking. If you feel tired, try doing little and often, rather than a lot in one go. It is important to listen to your body.

Driving

You should not drive until you feel confident to do so safely, and we advise you to inform your insurance provider before returning to driving.

The main physiotherapy considerations for driving are:

- Can you turn your head to look in blind spots without pain or stiffness?
- Do you have enough movement in your shoulders to be able to turn the steering wheel?
- Can you comfortably hold your arms on the steering wheel for the necessary length of time?
- Can you complete an emergency stop?

Always check with your consultant if you have any concerns or questions about driving after your surgery.

Activities

It is best to return to your usual activities gradually. You can start to do some light domestic chores as soon as you go home. You should avoid heavy lifting for 6 months after your surgery, unless advised otherwise by your physiotherapist. Your physiotherapist will discuss your individual plan during your assessment.

Contact details

Churchill Surgical Physiotherapy Team

Telephone: **01865 235 391** (8.00am to 4.00pm, Monday to Friday).

Specialist Surgery Inpatient Physiotherapy Team

Telephone: **01865 221 540**

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.

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Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
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