

## Reducing the risk of lymphoedema after surgery and/or radiotherapy to remove lymph nodes from your neck

**Lymph** is a colourless fluid that forms in the tissues of the body. It normally drains back into the blood circulation through a network of vessels and nodes called the lymphatic system. Oedema means swelling.

**Lymph nodes** act as filters removing dead or abnormal cells, including cancer cells and bacteria, playing an important part in the body's defence against infection. There are hundreds of lymph nodes in the body. They are found in clusters in the head and neck region, underarms (axillae), groin, pelvis and abdomen. As lymph returns to the circulation, the lymph filters through these nodes draining into larger lymph vessels in the body which then join the main circulation.

**Lymphoedema** is chronic swelling in the tissues below the skin which occurs when lymph cannot drain away. Lymphoedema may occur:

- when lymph nodes are removed through surgery or damaged because they contain cancer cells
- when lymph vessels are scarred or damaged because of the effects of treatment or disease
- when drainage routes are reduced if scar tissue forms following surgery and/or radiotherapy.

Not everyone develops lymphoedema following the removal of lymph nodes from the neck but you are at risk of developing it in the face and neck on the same side that you had surgery and/or radiotherapy. The most common place for swelling to develop is under the chin. The risk of lymphoedema is life long and may develop following a biopsy of the lymph nodes.

To avoid overloading your lymphatic system, which could trigger swelling, it is important to try to:

- look after your skin to try and reduce the risk of infection and inflammation
- avoid injury to the area at risk.

### Helping to reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema

#### Skin care

If you shave, you can continue your normal shaving routine. Regularly using an unperfumed moisturiser will help prevent your skin from becoming dry. Dry skin can lead to the skin developing cracks. These can be entry sites for bacteria and therefore increase the risk of infection. If you damage your skin, wash the area thoroughly and apply a simple antiseptic cream or lotion.



If you notice any signs of infection, for example if the skin on your face or neck becomes sore or red and this is combined with a high temperature, shivering or flu-like symptoms, contact your family doctor (GP) who may prescribe a course of antibiotics. You will need to take a 14 day course of a broad spectrum antibiotic to ensure that the infection is fully treated.

#### **Do:**

- Carry out daily mouth care and have regular dental check-ups to reduce the risk of infections and abscesses.
- Use insect repellent to prevent insect bites. If you get bitten, ensure the area is kept clean, but if it becomes infected, contact your GP as soon as possible for antibiotic treatment. If you are going on holiday and have had a previous episode of infection, you may wish to see your GP to obtain a standby prescription for antibiotics for use in an emergency.
- Use a minimum 40 SPF or above sun protection cream all year round and wear a hat when in the sun. Take care not to burn as this could cause inflammation.

#### **On areas at risk of lymphoedema , try to avoid:**

- Cuts, scratches and insect bites
- Extremes of temperature, such as ice packs, saunas or steam rooms as this could overload your lymphatic system triggering swelling
- Deep tissue massage - only light massage is recommended in the area where you are at risk of lymphoedema
- Tight fitting jewellery and collars as this could restrict lymph drainage.

#### **Exercise**

- Regular exercise is good for your lymphatic system as muscle activity helps lymph drainage
- It is also important in maintaining your range of movement
- You should continue any neck exercises you have been given
- If you start to notice any problems with pain/ stiffness or reduced movement in your neck or shoulders then speak to your clinical nurse specialist or hospital doctor about a referral to a physiotherapist for advice.

#### **Contact details**

If you have any questions regarding lymphoedema or if you develop swelling, however mild, please contact the lymphoedema service, as it is easier to treat in the early stages.

Chelsea: 0207 808 2981

Sutton: 0208 661 3504

Alternatively, please call:

**The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline:** 020 8915 6899  
(available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

