

A Patient's Guide to  
Physiotherapy Advice and  
Exercises from four weeks after  
Neck Dissection Surgery

**This leaflet should only be given out by  
a physiotherapist**

Patient Information Series No 47

This leaflet has been written in collaboration with physiotherapists and other health professionals within Mount Vernon Cancer Network.

If you have difficulty reading this size of print, a version of this leaflet or any of our leaflets can be produced for you in a larger print.

# A Patient's Guide to Physiotherapy Advice and Exercises from four weeks after Neck Dissection Surgery

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## Introduction

This leaflet aims to offer advice and provide details of exercises to patients from four weeks after head and neck dissection surgery. The information may not be relevant or appropriate for patients at other stages in their recovery.

If there is anything in this leaflet that is unclear, please contact your physiotherapist. Please note that you should only do the exercises if a physiotherapist has shown you what to do.

The exercises are designed to strengthen your shoulder muscles to allow you to regain as near to normal arm movement as possible, as well as to regain and then maintain neck movement. Your physiotherapist will guide you through the exercises.

As the scar from the surgery heals, it will tend to become tighter and thicker. Scar management is, therefore, an essential part of your treatment to minimise these effects.

It is important that you do the exercises and scar massage regularly in order to achieve the best range of movement of your shoulder and neck, and to reduce the effects of the scarring.

Some patients may also need to have radiotherapy treatment after their operation. This can cause further scar tissue to form over a period of time.

It is therefore beneficial for the effects of scarring following surgery to be reduced as much as possible before radiotherapy commences.

## **Effects of surgery**

### **Scar Tissue**

Scar tissue is produced as a result of the body's normal healing mechanism following injury or surgery. It takes approximately 18 months to two years for scars to mature fully.

During this time, symptoms of tightness and thickening can be greatly relieved by regular firm massage with a non-perfumed cream, such as an aqueous cream, and by regular, gentle stretching. The massage should only be carried out if the skin is well healed and intact.

By doing this early on in your recovery, you will hopefully ensure you regain some of the movement you may have lost. Your physiotherapist will show you how to do this.

Initially it may seem as though you are not making much difference. However, if you persevere you will begin to notice a difference in the feel of your neck and the range of your head movement.

Special care should be taken during your radiotherapy treatment as your skin may become more fragile. Any red or sore skin should be seen and assessed by the nursing staff.

### **Range of movement**

The range of movement in your shoulder may be reduced as a result of the surgery and / or radiotherapy; this may weaken some of the muscles that coordinate your arm movement.

In this event, the exercises in this leaflet are designed to restore as much movement as possible, and to

strengthen muscles that will help to compensate for the loss from any nerve damage.

The range of movement in your neck may also be reduced because of the surgery and / or radiotherapy. The neck exercises shown in this leaflet aim to help you to regain and maintain as much movement as possible.

### **General advice**

After an operation, it is usual to feel tired for some time. It is important that you pace yourself during the day so that you are able to carry out the exercises in this booklet on a regular basis.

You may need to reduce the number of repetitions or the frequency of them, but it is important that you do some exercises every day. Please contact your physiotherapist if you are concerned.

### **Household activities**

It is important to begin by doing light activities, such as dusting, pegging out light clothing, washing up and putting out the rubbish. You can gradually introduce heavier activities such as gardening from six weeks onwards.

## **Driving**

Your consultant will advise you about when you may begin to drive again. However, to ensure you are safe on the road and have full control of your vehicle, you must be able to turn your head sufficiently to look behind you and have regained good strength in your arms. You should also be able to make an emergency stop before attempting to drive again.

## **Returning to work / sports**

Returning to work / sports will depend on whether or not you are to have radiotherapy after your surgery. Please check with your consultant.

## **Exercises**

The following pages of exercises are designed to help you regain or improve normal movement in your neck and shoulder. If you are unable or unsure of how to do them, please contact your physiotherapist for help.

It is important these exercises are done correctly to prevent abnormal movement patterns. You should take time to do these well, and try not to rush them. Exercises should be done in a warm environment and in comfortable clothing.


Please attempt to do the exercises three times a day, increasing or reducing the number of repetitions depending on the condition of your skin after radiotherapy or on your pain level.


Any discomfort from doing the exercises should settle quickly. If it does not settle, please contact your physiotherapist for advice.


Your physiotherapist may also give you some additional shoulder exercises to do, suited to you individually.


## Neck exercises


Repeat each exercise ..... times, 3 times a day


	<p><b>Exercise 1</b></p> <p>Tilt your head away from the affected side to give gentle stretch. Hold for 15 seconds.</p>
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	<p><b>Exercise 2</b></p> <p>Use your hand to pull your head gently further over</p>
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	<p><b>Exercise 3</b></p> <p>Turn your head to look over your shoulder and give a gentle stretch. Hold for 15 seconds</p>
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	<p><b>Exercise 4</b></p> <p>Use your hand to push your head gently further round</p>
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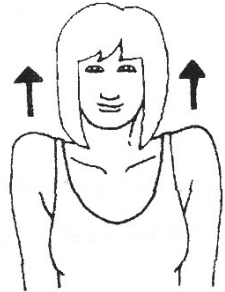
	<p><b>Exercise 5</b></p> <p>In a sitting position, tilt your chin upwards to give a stretch</p>
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	<p><b>Exercise 6</b></p> <p>Holding your affected shoulder down, turn your head away and give a gentle stretch</p>
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## Shoulder exercises


These exercises should only be done under the supervision of a physiotherapist (who may alter or add to those shown here depending on individual needs).

Repeat each exercise ..... times, 3 times a day.




**Exercise 1**

Sit or stand. Lift your shoulders towards your ears and slowly roll them backwards. Relax and repeat.



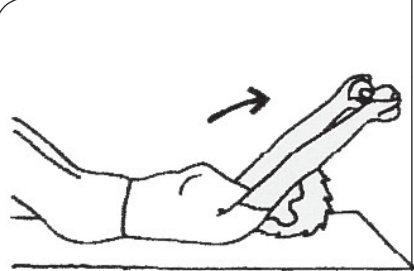
**Exercise 2**

Square your shoulders by bringing the edges of your shoulder blades together in the middle of your back.




**Exercise 3**

Sit or stand. Keep your elbows at right angles and into your side. Move forearms outwards and back again.



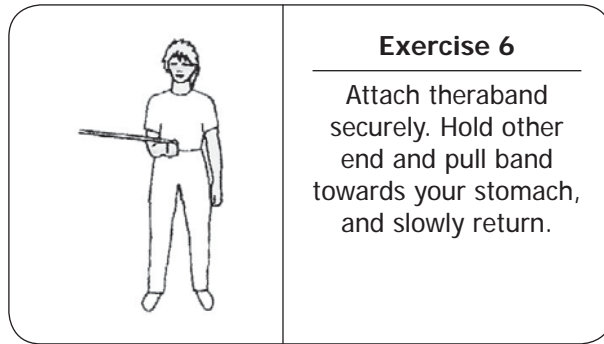
**Exercise 4**

On your back with knees bent, hold stick with hands shoulder-width apart. Raise arms above head slowly, then lower.



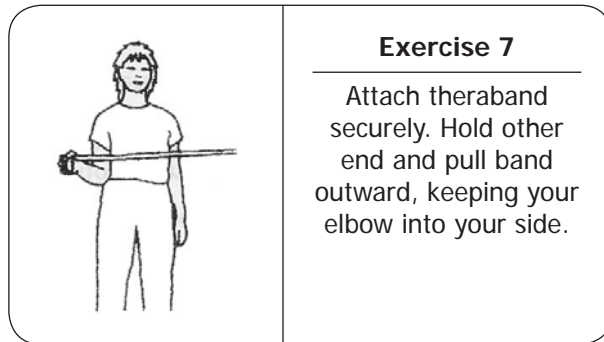
**Exercise 5**

Lying comfortably on the bed, place your hands at the side of your head and push your elbows gently into the pillow.



### Exercise 6

Attach theraband securely. Hold other end and pull band towards your stomach, and slowly return.



### Exercise 7

Attach theraband securely. Hold other end and pull band outward, keeping your elbow into your side.

## What to do if the nerve to your shoulder is affected

The accessory nerve supplies one of the big muscles involved in shoulder movement. If this nerve is affected during surgery or radiotherapy, you will have difficulty lifting your arm above your head.

A separate list of exercises is available for patients who have been affected in this way. The exercises will focus on strengthening and stabilising specific muscles to help compensate for the loss of movement in the shoulder.

## Postural advice

Good posture is very important for correct positioning of your head and shoulders. After your operation, it may feel easier for you to sit in a slumped position, but in the long run this will lead to muscle weakness and tighter scarring.

Sitting with a firm support in the small of your back, or standing tall, with your shoulders squared but relaxed, will place joints and soft tissues in a good position. You will need to practise this until it becomes your normal posture.

It may be helpful to look at yourself in a mirror whilst doing this to ensure that your head and shoulders are in a good position. The improvement in your posture will aid the movement of your shoulders and neck.

## Conclusion

If you have any difficulties with any of the exercises or the advice given in this booklet, please contact your physiotherapist. Contact details of your therapist and other members of your team may be kept overleaf.

## Useful contacts

### Members of Head & Neck Team:

Consultant Oncologist: .....

tel: .....

Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS): .....

tel: .....

Speech & Language Therapist (SLT): .....

tel: .....

Dietician: .....

tel: .....

Physiotherapy Department: .....

### Physiotherapy Department

Mount Vernon Hospital, Rickmansworth Road,  
Northwood Middlesex HA6 2RN

tel: 01923 844261

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## Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre

for cancer support & information

*... working to improve the lives of people affected by cancer...*

This leaflet forms part of a series of publications produced by the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC).

If you would like further information about any aspect of cancer and its treatments, please drop in to the centre or call the Helpline.

The LJMC is staffed by healthcare professionals and trained volunteers and is part of the Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

- ◇ Drop-in centre for support and information
- ◇ Telephone Helpline
- ◇ Benefits Advice \*
- ◇ Pre-treatment visits
- ◇ Complementary therapies \*
- ◇ Relaxation classes
- ◇ Counselling \*
- ◇ Support groups
- ◇ Look Good...Feel Better™ beauty workshops

\* These services are available to patients under the care of an NHS oncologist based at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre.

Opening hours: Mon - Fri: 9.30am - 1.00pm & 2.00 - 4.30pm

Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre  
situated between the Cancer Centre and Gate 3 (White Hill)  
Mount Vernon Hospital, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 2RN  
Telephone Helpline: **01923 844014**  
[www.ljmc.org](http://www.ljmc.org)