

Lymphedema: Prevention and Treatment for the Face and Neck

Lymphatic System

The lymphatic (or lymph) system is a network of lymph vessels, tissues and organs that carry lymph fluid throughout the body.

Normally, lymph nodes filter fluid as it flows through them, trapping bacteria, viruses and other foreign substances. Without normal lymph drainage, fluid can build up in the affected part of the body and lymphedema can develop. Lymphedema is a type of swelling that happens when the lymphatic system becomes blocked and is not able to take the lymph fluid back to the heart.

Lymphedema

Lymphedema is a buildup of fluid that occurs when fluid drained by the lymph vessels does not flow out of the face and neck on your affected side. This fluid buildup may result in swelling. Lymphedema may occur when some of the lymph nodes in the neck are affected by cancer, removed during surgery or treated with radiation.

Although it is not always clear why some people develop swelling and others do not, it is sometimes related to infection, injury or trauma involving the head, face or neck. Lymphedema can occur 2 to 3 months and even years after surgery or radiation treatment.

With improvements to surgery and radiation therapy, lymphedema is less likely to occur today. Although most patients have a low risk of developing lymphedema, it is important for you to be aware of this condition and what you can do to prevent it. Lymphedema can improve with treatment.

If you notice any swelling in the head, face or neck area, call your doctor or care team **right away**. You may be referred to Rehabilitation (Rehab) Services for the management of lymphedema. Early treatment is important in preventing complications.

Help with Lymph Drainage

Follow the guidelines below to promote good lymph drainage:

- Maintain full active range of motion in the jaw, neck and shoulder.
 - Full range of motion will maximize use of muscles to assist with lymph drainage. Your therapists can provide range of motion exercises.
 - Perform specific exercises that are designed to improve lymph drainage. Your therapist can provide these exercises.

- Maintain an active lifestyle and avoid being sedentary.
- Elevate your head slightly when sleeping or resting. Do not allow your head to hang or droop to the side.

Infection and Injury Precautions

Infection or injuries may trigger the onset of lymphedema. Lymphedema may become worse if your head, face or neck becomes infected or injured. Follow these precautions:

- Avoid exposing your skin to extreme temperature.
 - Reduce exposure to excessive heat, such as saunas, whirlpool spas or extremely hot showers.
 - Refrain from applying ice directly on the skin of the affected side of the head, face or neck.
 - Try to cool down if you are overheated. For example, place cool towels over the head and neck for short periods of time or move to an air-conditioned or cooler area.
- Prevent burns to the face and neck.
 - Use a sunscreen with a sun protection factor (SPF) of at least 15 or higher.
 - Wear sun-protective cover such as a hat over your head, face or neck.
- Avoid cuts and scratches to the face and neck.
 - Use an electric razor when shaving.
 - Avoid waxing or plucking facial hair.
 - **Do not** touch or squeeze blemishes such as pimples, black heads or white heads.
 - Treat cuts, insect bites and scrapes right away. Wash them well, apply antibacterial ointment and cover with a bandage. Consult with your care team for the appropriate antibiotic ointment.
- Avoid dry skin.
 - Apply a moisturizing lotion after grooming to help prevent chapped, dried and cracked skin.
- Consult with your medical team if you need a medical procedure performed on the affected side of your head, face or neck.

Special Precautions

Call your doctor right away if your head, face or neck shows signs of infection, such as:

- Red streaks on the head, face or neck
- Warmth, redness, pain, swelling on the head, face or neck
- A fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher

If you notice swelling, contact your care team for a referral to Rehab Services. Physical therapists certified in lymphedema management can provide a comprehensive program to help manage lymphedema. This includes education, exercises, compression bandaging, manual lymphatic drainage therapy and fitting of compression garments.

For more information, contact Rehab Services at 904-202-7300