

Physiotherapy for patients recovering from head and neck surgery

This information sheet is for patients who are having surgery for conditions affecting their mouth, jaw, face and/or neck.

It explains how physiotherapy can help you recover from your operation.

What is physiotherapy?

Physiotherapy is a treatment that you actively participate in, rather than something you just have done to you. It works best when you work together with your physiotherapists to help yourself recover. They will guide you with advice and information about what you can do to help yourself.

The role of the physiotherapist

The role of the physiotherapist is to assess your needs, identify any problems which can be helped by physiotherapy, and devise an individual treatment plan for you.

You will normally be assessed the day after your operation, and will be seen as required until you leave hospital, or until input from the physiotherapist is no longer needed.

Physiotherapy may consist of:

- Advice about your posture.
- Chest clearance techniques.
- General mobility rehabilitation (moving around).
- Neck, shoulder and jaw exercises.
- Donor flap site exercises (where tissue has been removed).

Your physiotherapist will be able to give you more information. If there is anything you are unsure about, please do not hesitate to ask.

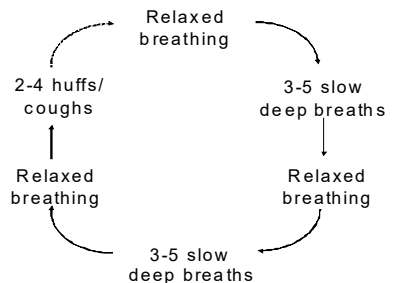
Chest clearance techniques

Everybody's lungs produce phlegm as part of their natural clearing system. After a general anaesthetic, this clearing system slows down and phlegm can build up. Long operations can also reduce the amount of air that you can get into your lungs. Both of these things can cause problems.

Your physiotherapist will work with you to help reverse these changes. This may involve some chest clearance and breathing exercises.

You should try a cough every hour. It will not do any damage to your wound and will help prevent a chest infection.

You may be advised to support your wound (for example by placing your hand over your dressings while you cough).



General mobility rehabilitation

- In the first few days after your operation, it is important that you get up out of bed and start moving around. Walking helps your lungs to re-expand and encourages good circulation.
- Generally, the day after your operation you will be helped to get out of bed and sit in a chair. There are exceptions to this with certain types of surgery.

- Gradually increase the distances you are able to walk until you are fully mobile again. Aim to walk at least the length of the ward three to four times per day, if you can.
- Before going home from hospital, you may need a 'stair assessment' to make sure that you are safe and confident getting up and down stairs when you go home.

Neck and shoulder exercises

- For the first few days whilst your drains are in, don't actively exercise your neck, shoulders or jaw.
- Once any drains are out, gentle exercises will help to improve movement and reduce swelling, pain and stiffness. Stretches can help to prevent a tight scar.
- During surgery, the nerves in the area may be stretched, bruised or cut. If this has happened, the nerves may not send messages to the muscles as well. This can lead to reduced movement, particularly in the face and shoulders, and can mean recovery takes a little longer.

How often should I do these exercises?

It is always best to do 'little and often', rather than lots of exercises at one time. Exercising two to three times a day for five to ten minutes is best. Your physiotherapist will be able to advise you exactly what to do.

Please continue with your exercises, even after you have regained full movement and strength, until at least three months after you have finished your full treatment programme (including any radiotherapy).

Posture

Be aware of your posture. Try not to 'slump' or round your shoulders. Try to sit and stand upright, with your head up and shoulders and upper back pulled back and down. When sitting, it may help to put a pillow under your arm.



Other things you can do to help yourself

Keep active – Try to keep as active as you can, for example go for regular walks. This can help maintain a level of fitness to see you through your treatment period. If you feel tired, try doing a little and often, rather than a lot in one go – listen to your body.

Good nutrition – For your wounds to heal, good nutrition is vital (both eating healthily and getting in enough volume). This will help you get back to your normal activities. Please follow the advice from your dietitian and any swallowing advice from your speech and language therapist.

Avoid smoking – This will help your wound to heal and can help to avoid many other problems, such as your cancer returning. Please ask your health professional if you would like support to help quit smoking.

Scar massage – Massaging the scar can help to improve the size and appearance of your scar and the range of movement at your neck. Massage should only be started once the wound is fully healed (when there are no scabs or open areas) and you have finished any radiotherapy.

- Use a non-perfumed moisturising cream, such as aqueous cream.
- Gently press on your scar, moving it and the surrounding tissue with your fingers.
- Make small circles, moving the skin over the tissue underneath, rather than rubbing on the skin surface.
- Massage for about 10 minutes, two to three times a day.

If you notice any change in the appearance of your skin, for example it becomes redder, painful or starts to ooze, then stop the massage and speak to your physiotherapist.

Returning to normal activities

Provided there are no problems with your wound healing, try to return to normal activities (such as washing and dressing yourself) while in hospital.

You can start to do some light domestic chores as soon as you go home. Try to build up to longer/heavier tasks gradually.

For the first six weeks after your operation, try to avoid heavy activities such as hanging out wet washing, and lifting anything heavier than a full kettle, for example shopping bags or children.

If you drive, ask your consultant when it is okay to return to driving. The main considerations for driving are:

- The effects of any painkillers you may be taking. For example, do they make you feel drowsy?
- Can you turn your head to look in blind spots without pain or stiffness?
- Can you comfortably tolerate holding your arms up to the steering wheel for the necessary length of time?
- If you have had a flap from a part of your leg, could you comfortably hop on that leg? This will be an indicator of your ability to operate the brake or clutch to do an emergency stop.

Please refer to information on the DVLA website **www.dvla.gov.uk**. If you want to return to driving, it may be worth trying it out in a quiet area with family/friends first, before going out in traffic.

Follow-up

You may be referred for ongoing physiotherapy when you leave hospital to prevent future problems with jaw, neck, shoulder, or flap donor site movement and pain. The amount of physiotherapy you receive will depend on your individual needs. If at any point a problem reappears or you develop a new problem, please speak with your health professional.

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Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about physiotherapy following head and neck surgery, please contact:

- The Guy's outpatient physiotherapy department on **020 7188 5099** and ask for the **head and neck outpatient physiotherapist**
- The **head and neck inpatient physiotherapists** via **020 7188 5110/5106**, or hospital switchboard on **020 7188 7188** and ask for bleep **2136** and **0694**.
- Or, if you are known to the Community Head and Neck Team (CHANT), call the **CHANT physiotherapists** on **020 3049 2350**.

Please leave a message if your call is not answered and someone will call you back. Opening hours are 8.30am to 4.45pm, Monday to Friday, (CHANT 9am to 5pm).

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints)

e: complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

t: 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics.

Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

NHS Choices – Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, and to become a member:

t: 0800 731 0319 **e:** members@gstt.nhs.uk

w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

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