Exercises and advice for patients recovering from thyroid surgery

This leaflet is for patients who have had surgery for conditions affecting their thyroid gland.
Following your thyroid surgery, the position of your wound can make you feel reluctant to move your neck and shoulders.

Provided your wound is healing well, gentle exercises are beneficial to the healing process and will help to prevent neck stiffness.

The following will help your recovery:
- good posture
- neck and shoulder exercises/stretches
- scar massage
- gradually returning/building up to heavier physical activity.

Your movements should return to normal about 4 to 6 weeks after your operation.

Please seek further advice from your health professional if you are still having any problems after this time.
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 your shoulders and upper back pulled back and down.

Neck and shoulder exercises
Once any drains are removed, gentle exercises will help to improve movement and reduce swelling, pain and stiffness. Stretches can help to prevent a tight scar.

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 2 to 3 times a day for 5 to 10 minutes is best.

How long do I need to do the exercises for?
Even after you have regained full movement and strength, please continue with your exercises for up to 3 months after your full treatment programme is complete (including any radiotherapy), and longer if you have any ongoing problems.
Which exercises should I be doing?

1) Head turns
Turn your head to look over one shoulder until you feel the beginning of a stretch. Hold for 3 to 5 counts and return to the middle. Then turn your head towards the other shoulder. Repeat 5 to 10 times to each side, keeping your shoulders still.

2) Head tilt
Tilt your head to one side until you feel the beginning of a stretch. Hold for 3 to 5 counts. Return to the middle then tilt to the other side. Repeat 5 to 10 times to each side, keeping your chin pointing forwards and your shoulders still.
3) Look up/look down
Gently bend your head forward, lowering your chin towards your chest.
Return to the middle and then gently raise your chin, tilting your head back, to look up.
**Only go as far as you are comfortable** – you should just feel the beginning of a stretch to start with.
Once your wound is fully healed you can stretch a bit more and consider holding the stretch for a few counts.
Repeat 5 to 10 times.

4a) Shoulder shrug
Slowly shrug your shoulders, trying to move them at the same time and with the same speed.
Repeat 5 to 10 times.

4b) Shoulder roll
Roll your shoulders forwards and then backwards 5 to 10 times each.

5) Shoulder squeeze
Sit upright.
Squeeze your shoulder blades back and together.
Hold for 5 to 10 counts and then relax.
Repeat 5 to 10 times.
6) **Forward arm raise**
Raise your arm up in front, continuing up over and above your head.

If it is difficult:
- a) put your hand on your shoulder and raise your elbow up, or
- b) use your other hand to help support your arm, or
- c) slide your hand up a wall, using the wall to support the weight of your arm, or
- d) do the exercises lying down on your back.

Lower down and repeat the raises 5 to 10 times.

7) **Side arm raise**
Leading with your thumb, raise your arm out to the side and up alongside your head.

If it is difficult:
- a) put your hand on your shoulder and lift your elbow out to the side
- b) use a stick to help guide your arm up,
- c) stand facing the wall and slide your hand out to the side and up, or
- d) do the exercises lying down on your back.

Lower down and repeat 5 to 10 times.
How will I know if I have done too much?
You should feel a stretch when exercising, not pain. You may well feel sore and stiff, however this should ease with gentle movement.

Make sure you exercise gently and slowly, building up the number of repetitions to those recommended. Don’t do significantly more than 3 times a day, 5 to 10 repeats.

Aim to do your exercises about 30 minutes to 1 hour after taking any painkillers.

Please tell your health professional if your wound changes colour, becomes swollen or starts to ooze.

Other things you can do to help your recovery
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 little and often, rather than a lot in one go. It is important to listen to your body.

Aim to build up towards achieving 10 minutes of activity that makes you slightly to moderately breathless, while on the ward. Gradually increase this (to either 3 x 10 minutes or up to 30 minutes at one time) when out of hospital. Strengthening activities (for example, standing up and sitting down repeatedly, or stair climbing) should be performed at least 3 times per week.

If you would like further advice about physical activity, please ask your health professional.
**Good nutrition**
For your wounds to heal, good nutrition is vital (both eating healthily and getting enough calories). This will help you get back to your normal activities.

**Avoid smoking**
This will help your wound to heal and improve your overall health. 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 moisturising cream (non-perfumed if you are concerned about skin irritation).
- **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 5 minutes, 2 to 3 times a day.

If you notice any change in the appearance of your skin, for example it becomes redder, painful or starts to ooze, 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 over the next 4 to 6 weeks.

For the first two 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. Do not swim until your wound is fully healed.

If you drive, ask your consultant when it is okay to return to driving – a minimum of two weeks without driving would be advisable. The main considerations for driving are:

- What 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 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.

Please refer to information on the DVLA website, [www.dvla.gov.uk](http://www.dvla.gov.uk).
Contact us
If you have any questions or concerns about movement or exercise following your thyroid surgery, please contact:

- The **head and neck inpatient physiotherapists**,  
  **t:** 020 7188 5110/5106,  
  or via the **hospital switchboard**,  
  **t:** 020 7188 7188, and ask for bleep 2136 or 0694. Please leave a message if your call is not answered and someone will call you back, Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.45pm.

- **Blundell Ward** (even if your stay was on another ward), **t:** 020 7188 8862/0804/0807

For more leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)
Useful sources of information

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.

\textit{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.

\textit{t}: 020 7188 8801 (PALS)  \quad \textit{e}: pals@gstt.nhs.uk
\textit{t}: 020 7188 3514 (complaints)  \quad \textit{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.

\textit{t}: 020 7188 8815  \quad \textit{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.

\textit{t}: 111

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

\textit{w}: www.nhs.uk