



York and Scarborough  
Teaching Hospitals  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Head and Neck Physiotherapy Surgery Advice

Physiotherapy and exercise guide for  
patients, relatives and carers

① For more information, please contact:

**Physiotherapy Department**

Surgical Therapy Team

York Hospital

Telephone: 01904 725383

Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE

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## **What is this leaflet about?**

This is a guide about physiotherapy and exercise which will help you in your recovery after head and neck surgery.

After head and neck surgery shoulder and neck function can be reduced therefore it is important to start early intervention with exercises to aid strength and movement. These can be continued long-term.

This leaflet covers common questions patients have about physiotherapy and exercises.

It includes exercises to complete:

- Before your operation
- After your operation
- After you return home

Your doctor or physiotherapist can answer any questions you might still have which are not covered in this leaflet.

# **Exercise summary**

## **Exercises before your operation:**

- Shoulder Range of Movement
- Neck Range of Movement
- General Exercise

## **Exercises after your operation:**

- Deep breathing exercises
- Airway Clearance Techniques
- Circulation exercises
- Shoulder girdle and neck range of movement exercises
- Sitting out daily
- Walking around the ward

## **Exercises after you have returned home:**

- Airway Clearance Techniques
- Shoulder girdle and neck range of movement exercises
- Circulation exercises if not as mobile as normal
- General exercise

# What exercises do I need to do before my operation?

## General exercise

You should try to be as active as possible before your operation. This helps your recovery after surgery. Start exercising as soon as you know you are having an operation.

NHS England recommends that you aim to do **at least** 30 minutes of moderate exercise or 15 minutes intense exercise five days a week. Examples of moderate exercise are brisk walking or cycling. Examples of intense exercises are spin biking, jogging and walking the stairs. If you need to you can break the 30 minutes into smaller sessions.

The effects of anaesthetic can cause post-operative complications such as chest infections, blood clots (Deep Vein Thrombus/Pulmonary Embolism). Hence it is imperative to complete them post-operatively to help prevent these from occurring, by starting them pre-operatively then you will be able to feel and compare if there is a difference between the outcomes.

## Neck and Shoulder range of movements

You should start to exercise your shoulder and neck before your operation to build muscle strength which will aid recovery and function post-operatively.

Please see the exercises on pages 9 - 15

# What exercises do I need to do after my operation?

## Deep Breathing Exercises –

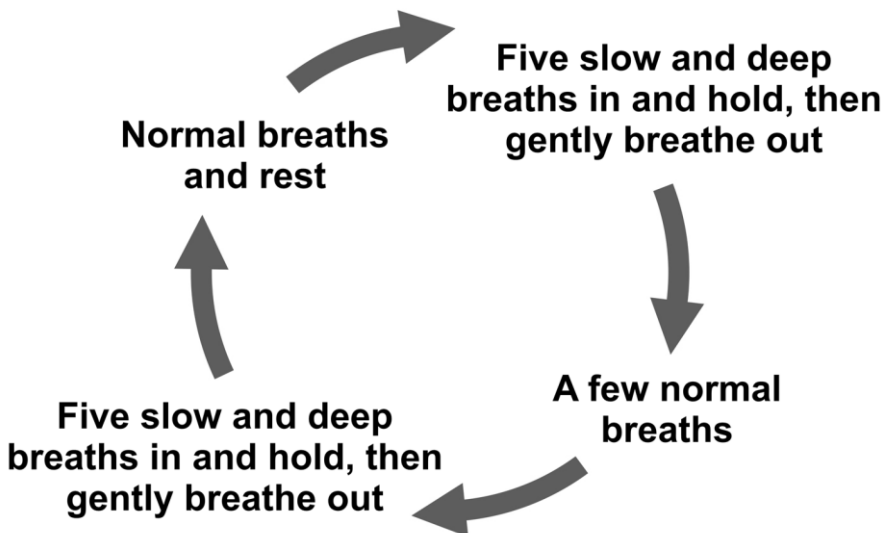
Regular deep breathing will aid you to –

- Keep your chest clear
- Prevent chest infection
- Relax and calm you
- Ease nausea (sickness)

What you will need – Upright position and adequate pain relief.

Make sure you are sitting in an upright position either in bed or in the chair and follow the diagram below.

Repeat **hourly** during the day.



## Exercises for secretion clearance –

If you get the feeling there is ‘something to come up’ but you are struggling to clear this, you can try the following exercise to make this easier. This is one of the least painful and most effective ways.

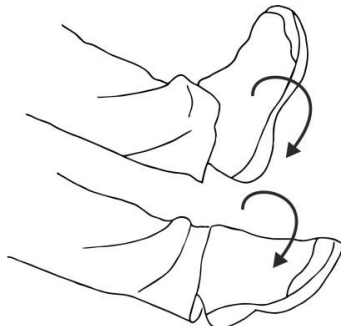
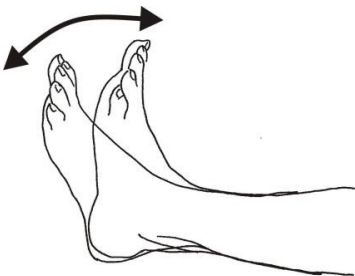
- Follow the flow diagram on the previous page
- After your fifth deep breath, force the air out of your lungs as though you are steaming up a mirror or glasses (this is the huff).
- You can add after the huff, a cough to further clear your airways.

## Circulation exercises –

Complete these exercises as soon as able to reduce the risk of a blood clot (DVT). They aid prevention of DVTs by maintaining the flow of blood in your legs whilst you are not as mobile as you normally might be.

- Keep your legs and ankles uncrossed at all times
- With your legs stretched out, briskly circle both your feet and bend them up and down.

**For either times 10 reps OR 30 seconds**



## **Sitting in a chair and walking –**

Within the first day after your operation you should aim to sit out into a chair. Someone will always be there to help you.

Once sat out, make sure you are comfortable; a pillow behind your back or a sheet to cover the chair may help with this.

It is important to sit out for a minimum of one hour on the first day and then increase the time as the days go, if you feel you can manage longer then by all means continue sitting out.

Gentle movement (leaning side to side, forwards and backwards) whilst in the chair will help you sit out for longer and will reduce the risk of skin/pressure damage.

When it comes to walking, you will always have someone with you until you are independent and safe. There may be need for an aid to assist you initially; this is intended to be needed for a short-term post-operatively only.

Setting yourself goals to walk distances on the ward will aid your recovery physically and mentally as it allows you to see progress each day. As well as provide you with the positive feeling of achievement and improvement daily.

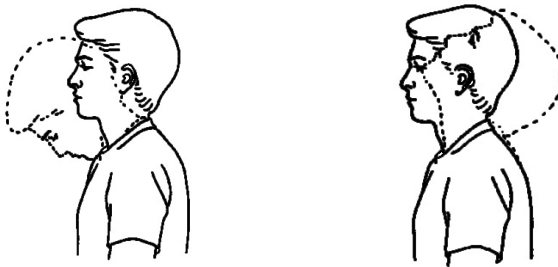


## Neck Range of movement –

It is really important to slowly introduce gentle neck range of movement exercises to prevent long-term effects that your operation can have such as; stiffness, loss of movement, loss of strength and pain.

### 1. Looking up and down

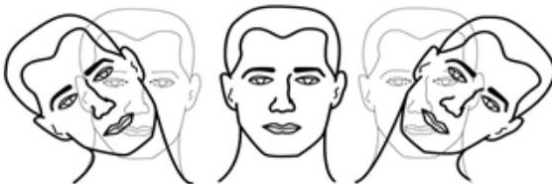
Sitting upright. Start with your head facing forwards, then slowly look down and slowly look up. Then return to forwards facing.



Exercise Prescription .... Reps .... Times a day

### 2. Side to side

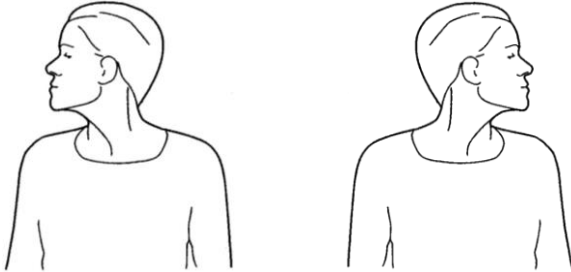
Sitting upright. Start with your head facing forwards and in the middle, slowly bring your ear to your shoulder on one side and then the other.



Exercise Prescription .... Reps .... Times a day

### 3. Turning side to side

Sitting upright. Start with you head facing forwards, slowly turn you head from side to side as though looking over your shoulder.



Exercise Prescription .... Reps .... Times a day

Post-operatively you may not be able to achieve full range of movement due to many reasons such as swelling, anatomical (body structures) changes. The exercises are to be used to start the movement and regain a functional level for you.

If pain occurs at any point during the exercises whilst in hospital please inform the physiotherapist. If occurs post admission contact the CNS team and drop the amount of repetitions and movement you are doing.

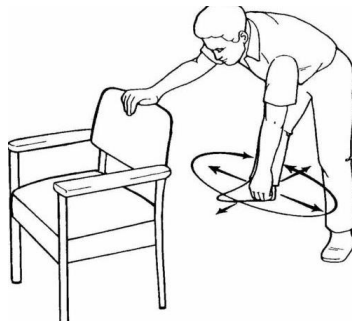
## Shoulder Girdle Range of Movement –

As well as your neck, your shoulder on the operated side will be affected post-operatively. It is really important to start the movement of the shoulder girdle (joints of the shoulder) as early as possible to increase the function of the arm.

### 1. Pendulum Swings

Sitting upright or standing (if safe to do so), bending at your waist, allow your arm to hang in front of you, keep your arm straight as able and complete the following:

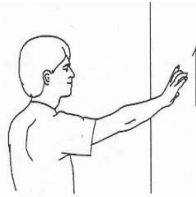
- Move the arm in a circular motion
- Move your arm forwards and backwards
- Move your arm side to side



Exercise Prescription   .... Reps   .... Times a day

## 2. Walking the wall

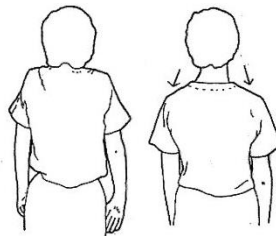
Sitting upright or standing (if safe to do so). Facing the wall (or back of door) place your fingers on the wall at waist height. Slowly begin to climb the wall with your fingers, keeping your chest facing the wall. Only go as far as you are able to then walk your fingers back down and ensure there is no pain.



Exercise Prescription .... Reps .... Times a day

## 3. Rolls and shrugs

Sitting upright in a bed or chair. Gently begin to roll your shoulders forwards then backwards. Then slowly begin to raise your shoulders up (shrug) and down again.



Exercise Prescription .... Reps .... Times a day

#### 4. Lateral Rotation

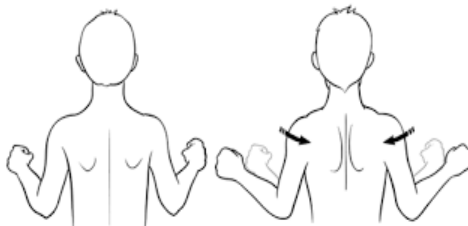
Sitting in an upright position. Tuck your elbows into your side and keep them there as able throughout the whole movement. Begin to bring your hands outwards slowly and then slowly return them to your stomach.



Exercise Prescription .... Reps .... Times a day

#### 5. Scapular Retraction

Sitting in an upright position, slowly bring your shoulder blades together at the back and squeeze. Slowly return to your original position.



Exercise Prescription .... Reps .... Times a day

Post-operatively you may not be able to achieve full range of movement due to many reasons such as swelling, anatomical (body structures) changes. The exercises are to be used to start the movement and regain a functional level for you.

If pain occurs at any point during the exercises whilst in hospital please inform the physiotherapist. If occurs post admission contact the CNS team and drop the amount of repetitions and movement you are doing.

# **What exercises do I need to do after I return home?**

You should continue with all the exercises on the previous pages 9-15.

These will aid your recovery at home whilst also preventing chest infections and deconditioning of your body. It is extremely important you continue with these exercises at the same level prescribed in the booklet.

Over time your exercise tolerance will gradually increase as your day to day activity level increases.

## **Regular Activity**

Aim to walk daily at home, each time increasing the distance and maybe the incline as time goes on.

Keeping a good baseline of fitness post-discharge will aid your recovery, allowing you to return to a level of function needed for activities in daily living.

If you wish to return to a specific sporting activity please discuss this with your consultant.

# **Frequently asked questions (FAQs)**

## **What happens if I have a new pain when exercising?**

If this occurs whilst you are on the ward then please make the physiotherapist aware and the exercises can be adapted. Likewise if this occurs whilst at home, please feel free to contact the physiotherapist via the number on page 18. It may mean you need to reduce the repetitions or the range of movement you are achieving in the exercises.

## **When should I stop exercising?**

In truth, you should also have some form of exercise as a part of your daily routine. When you are back home continue with the specific exercises within this booklet and then continue with regular exercise daily. The current NHS guidance is 150 minutes of moderate exercise weekly.

## **When can I start driving again?**

Seek advice from your surgeon and clinical nurse specialists at your follow-up clinic. When/if you do begin driving again you will have to make sure your insurance company are aware of changes to your medical health.



## **Other useful resources/websites**

**Macmillian Cancer Care** Telephone 0800 808 0000  
Macmillan.org.uk

**Head and Neck Cancer Foundation**  
hncf.org.uk Telephone 0330 133 0724

**Cancercare Centre, York Hospital**  
(Monday-Friday) Telephone 01904 721166

**Let's Face it!**  
lets-face-it.org.uk Telephone 01843 491291

**Mouth Cancer Foundation**  
mouthcancerfoundation.org Telephone 01924 950950

**Throat Cancer Foundation**  
throatcancerfoundation.org Telephone 0203 4754 065

**Changing Faces**  
changingfaces.org.uk Telephone 0300 012 0275

**Butterfly Thyroid Cancer Trust**  
butterfly.org.uk Telephone 01207 545469

**NALC**  
laryngectomy.org.uk Telephone 020 7730 8585

**The Swallows**  
Theswallows.org.uk Telephone 01253 428940

# Useful telephone numbers at York

## Consultant Surgeons – contacts for secretarial staff

Mr. R. Wortherspoon	01723 342081
Mr. A. Coatesworth	01904 726598
Mr. R. Taylor	01904 721161
Restorative Dentists Secretary	01904 725614
Clinical Nurse Specialists	01904 726063 01904 725726
Research Nurses	01904 721278
Dieticians	01904 725269
Speech and Language Therapists	01904 725768
Physiotherapists	01904 725249
Outpatient Clinic	01904 726501
Head and Neck Ward	01904 726026
Ward 16/NEU	01904 726016
ICU	01904 726040

## **Teaching, training and research**

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

## **Tell us what you think of this leaflet**

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact: Jenny Olivey, Advanced Clinical Specialist and/or Alexandra Williams, Senior Respiratory Physiotherapist York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE or telephone 01904 725528.

## **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email [yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net](mailto:yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net).

An answer phone is available out of hours.

# Leaflets in alternative languages or formats

If you would like this information in a different format, including braille or easy read, or translated into a different language, please speak to a member of staff in the ward or department providing your care.

Patient Information Leaflets can be accessed via the Trust's Patient Information Leaflet website:

[www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-information-leaflets/](http://www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-information-leaflets/)

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