

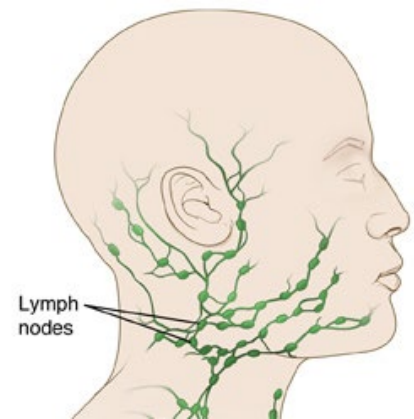
## Head and Neck Lymphedema

### *Your Guide to Head and Neck Radiation Therapy*

*This handout is for patients who have received radiation therapy to the head and neck. It explains lymphedema and how to lower your risk.*

#### What is the lymph system?

The *lymph system* is a network of tissues and organs. The system helps remove toxins from the body. As *lymph fluid* travels through *lymph vessels*, it passes through *lymph nodes*. These lymph nodes help filter wastes from the lymph fluid.



#### What is lymphedema?

*Lymphedema* is tissue swelling.

It can happen if lymph nodes are injured, or if they are removed as part of cancer treatment. When lymph nodes are not working as usual, it keeps lymph fluid from draining well. This causes fluid buildup and swelling.

*There are many lymph vessels and lymph nodes in the head and neck.*

#### How can I help avoid lymphedema?

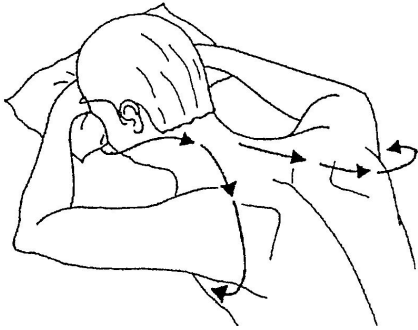
To avoid lymphedema, it is very important to protect your skin. If skin is injured, the body will send special chemicals to the area, causing inflammation. When the lymph system is not working well, your body cannot remove the extra fluid and swelling results.

Skin injuries include:

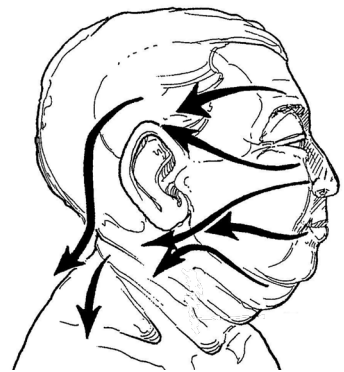
- Burns and sunburns
- Bites and scratches from insects and animals
- Bruises and cuts, including inside the mouth

Take good care to avoid breaking the skin surface on your face:

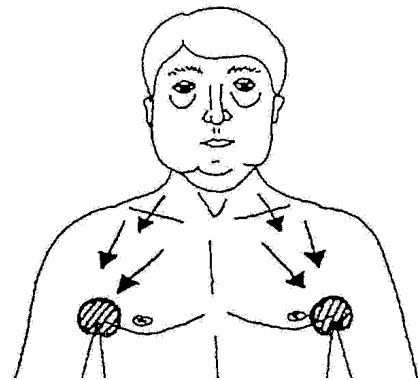
- If you shave your face, use an electric razor instead of a razor blade.
- Be careful with waxing and electrolysis.
- If you get a cut on your head or neck:
  - Wash it well.
  - Apply an antibiotic ointment.
  - Watch it closely for infection.
- If you see any signs of infection, see your healthcare provider as soon as you can. Your provider may prescribe antibiotics.
- Take good care of your mouth:
  - Brush and floss well to help prevent infections.
  - Use an alcohol-free mouthwash.
- Exercise regularly.
- Maintain a healthy body weight.
- Avoid tightening your neck and shoulder muscles. To help your lymph fluid flow well through this critical area:
  - When sitting at a desk or working on a computer, keep your neck and shoulders relaxed.
  - Lower your stress levels. We tend to tighten our shoulders and neck muscles when we feel stressed.
- Try sleeping with your upper body raised a little. This will improve lymph drainage. You can use extra pillows or a foam wedge under your upper body.
- Moisturize your skin to keep it from getting too dry.
- Do **not** wear clothes or jewelry that fit tightly around your neck.
- Be very careful when sitting in a hot tub, sauna, or using other forms of heat therapy:
  - Do **not** spend longer than 15 minutes in these settings.
  - Stop if you notice increased swelling.
- Avoid being outside in very cold weather. The cold can cause “rebound swelling” or chap your skin.



Step 3 (if you have a helper)



Step 10



Step 12

## Massage to Drain Lymph from Your Head and Neck

To start, focus on breathing slowly. Relax your body. When you are ready to begin:

- Follow these steps in order.
- Repeat each step 5 to 10 times.
- Try to do this full sequence 2 to 4 times a day.

Remember, this is **gentle massage**. Use only enough pressure to stretch the skin in the direction as indicated, then release.

1. Massage each armpit. Stroke your skin toward your heart, then release.
2. Massage from the area above your *clavicles* (collarbone) and upper chest. Stroke toward your armpits.
3. If you have a helper, have them massage the back of your neck and upper back, stroking toward your armpits. (See top drawing at left.)
4. Massage your scalp and the back of your neck.
5. Massage your jaw. Stroke toward the back of your neck.
6. Massage the back of your neck. Stroke down, toward your back.
7. Massage your temples. Stroke toward the back of your head.
8. Massage the back of your neck. Stroke upward, toward your head.
9. Massage under your lips. Stroke toward the back of your neck.
10. Massage your face (see middle drawing at left):
  - Massage your cheeks, stroking toward the back of your neck.
  - Starting at your nose, stroke across your cheeks, toward the back of your neck.
  - Massage under your eyes and over your ears. Stroke toward the back of your head and neck.
11. Massage the back of your neck, stroking toward your back and clavicles.
12. Massage the area above your clavicles and upper chest. Stroke toward your armpits. (See bottom drawing at left.)
13. Massage the back of your neck and upper back, stroking toward your armpits.

## Notes

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### Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Radiation Oncology:  
206.598.3100, weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.598.6190 and ask for the Radiation Oncologist on call.