



**HEAD & NECK CANCER**  
AUSTRALIA  
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# LYMPHOEDEMA



## LYMPHOEDEMA

This information may help answer some of your questions and help you think of other questions that you may want to ask your cancer care team; it is not intended to replace advice or discussion between you and your cancer care team.

### AN OVERVIEW TO LYMPHOEDEMA

Lymphoedema is tissue swelling that occurs due to problems with lymphatic drainage. Lymphoedema can develop in the head and neck after treatments such as removal of lymph glands (neck dissection) and radiotherapy. For more information about [neck dissection](#) and [radiotherapy](#) visit the Head and Neck Cancer Australia website.

Symptoms of head and neck lymphoedema may include:

- swollen eyes, face, lips, neck or chin
- feeling heavy or tight in your neck or face
- trouble moving the neck or jaw
- difficulty swallowing, speaking or breathing.

### CAUSES OF LYMPHOEDEMA

- The lymphatic system is made up of lymph nodes and lymphatic vessels
  - Lymph nodes are little 'filters' located throughout our body. They help the body to filter out germs and infections
  - Lymphatic vessels drain fluid out of the tissue, pass the fluid through the lymph node filters, and return the fluid to the blood stream.
- Lymphoedema happens when the lymphatic system is not working properly, causing fluid to build up in the area. This may happen because:
  - lymphatics were removed during surgery
  - lymphatics were damaged during radiation therapy
  - cancer has caused a blockage in the lymphatic system of the neck.
- Lymphoedema is more likely to occur in people who have had
  - both surgery and radiation therapy

- o both sides of the neck treated.
- The surgeon and/or radiation oncologist may recommend specific techniques that are less damaging to the lymphatic system. These include:
  - o a sentinel node biopsy that only remove a small number of draining lymph nodes
  - o radiation techniques that limit the amount of radiation therapy given to the lymph nodes.

## MANAGING LYMPHOEDEMA

- Treatment for lymphoedema aims to:
  - o reduce the swelling and prevent it from getting worse
  - o reduce the symptoms associated with lymphoedema such a discomfort, tightness, stiffness and difficulty swallowing
  - o unfortunately, lymphoedema is a long-term (chronic) problem and needs to be controlled rather than cured.
- There are two phases to lymphoedema management:
  - o Phase I is an intensive phase where you see a specialised lymphoedema physiotherapist or nurse. Treatment occurs daily and you are taught what to do
  - o Phase II is a maintenance phase where you apply what you have learnt on a daily basis.
- Treatments for lymphoedema may include:
  - o **Manual lymphatic drainage** – a massage designed to drain fluid from the affected area.
    - this is very important part of lymphoedema management and aims to push fluid from areas with poor lymphatic drainage to areas with good lymphatic drainage
  - o **Exercises to help with head and neck movement**
  - o **Compression bandages** to help reduce swelling
    - compression is more difficult in the head and neck region but are commonly used for arm and leg lymphoedema
    - taping is commonly used instead of bandages to help direct lymphatic drainage
  - o **Skin care** to prevent infection in the swollen skin. The skin acts as an important barrier against infection:
    - avoid drying out the skin by using soap-free alternatives and regular moisturisation
    - immediately clean any scratches, grazes or cuts and cover the area with a dry dressing

- If you have lymphoedema, you may have one or more of these treatments. Other important ways to reduce lymphoedema include:
  - Keep active to help the circulation of fluid.
  - Avoid activities that may strain the lymphatic system or stop lymph flow.
  - **See a doctor as soon as possible if any signs of an infection appear, such as redness or inflammation.**

## THE CANCER CARE TEAM

- Always tell your doctor if you notice new swelling in your face or neck. They can arrange for you to have tests to find out the cause if this is not expected.
- Your doctor may recommend that you get help from a health professional who has expertise in treating lymphoedema, such as a lymphoedema nurse or physiotherapist.
- A nurse or physiotherapist with special expertise in treating lymphoedema may:
  - massage the head and neck area using manual lymphatic drainage to help reduce swelling
  - demonstrate some exercises that help drain fluid in the head and neck area
  - provide advice on how to care for and prevent infection in the swollen skin.
- You can find more information and resources from the Australian Lymphology Association website: <https://www.lymphoedema.org.au/>

## QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR CANCER CARE TEAM

- Who should I speak to if I have concerns about my lymphoedema?
- What treatment do you recommend for lymphoedema?
- Can you refer me to a health professional who would be able to help me with lymphoedema?
- Is a compression garment appropriate for me?
- How much will lymphoedema treatment cost?
- What type of moisturiser should I use?
- What types of exercises can I do?
- Are there any techniques I can use at home to help my lymphoedema?
- How might my work be affected?
- How might my lifestyle be affected?

- Can I talk to someone about how I am feeling?

You may want to write specific questions here to ask your doctor or cancer care team

#### **About Head and Neck Cancer Australia**

Head and Neck Cancer Australia (formerly Beyond Five) is Australia's only charity dedicated to providing information and support to people living with head and neck cancer, caregivers, family and healthcare professionals.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia's mission is to improve the quality of life of everyone affected by head and neck cancer through education and access to support and to raise awareness of head and neck cancer nationally.

Head and Neck Cancer Australia supports people through their cancer journey, from diagnosis to treatment and life after cancer by providing comprehensive, easy to understand and easy to access information. We have the only Directory of Head and Neck Cancer services and support groups available in Australia and New Zealand helping people to find the right services and support when they need it most.

Phone: 1300 424 848

Email: [contact@headandneckcancer.org.au](mailto:contact@headandneckcancer.org.au)

Web: [www.headandneckcancer.org.au](http://www.headandneckcancer.org.au)

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**First Published: 2016**

**Last updated: November 2020**