

**St Margaret's**  
Hospice Care

# Lymphoedema Service

## Head and neck swelling

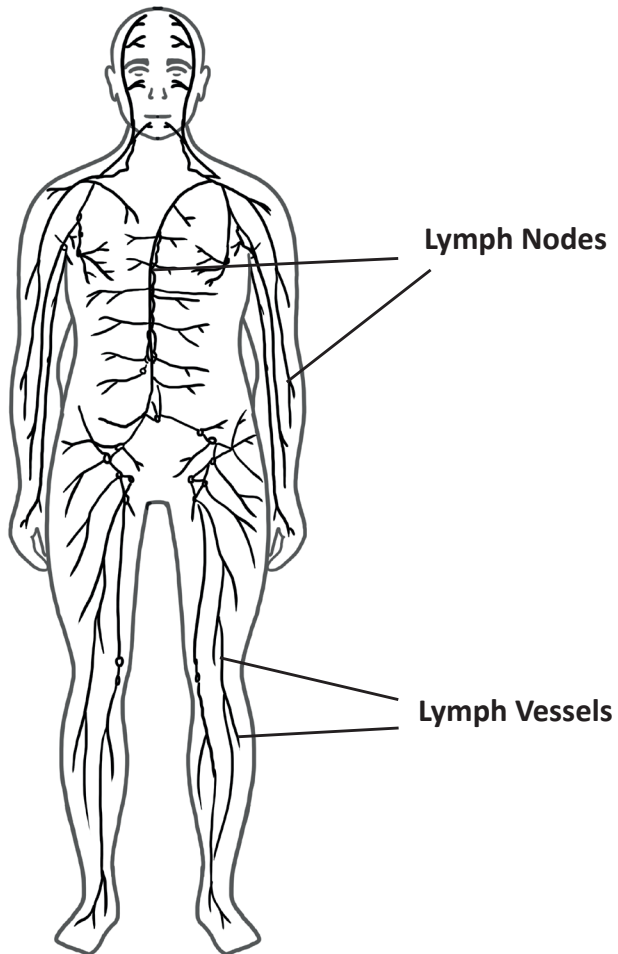
*Please bring this booklet with you to all of your appointments*



## Introduction - The lymphatic system

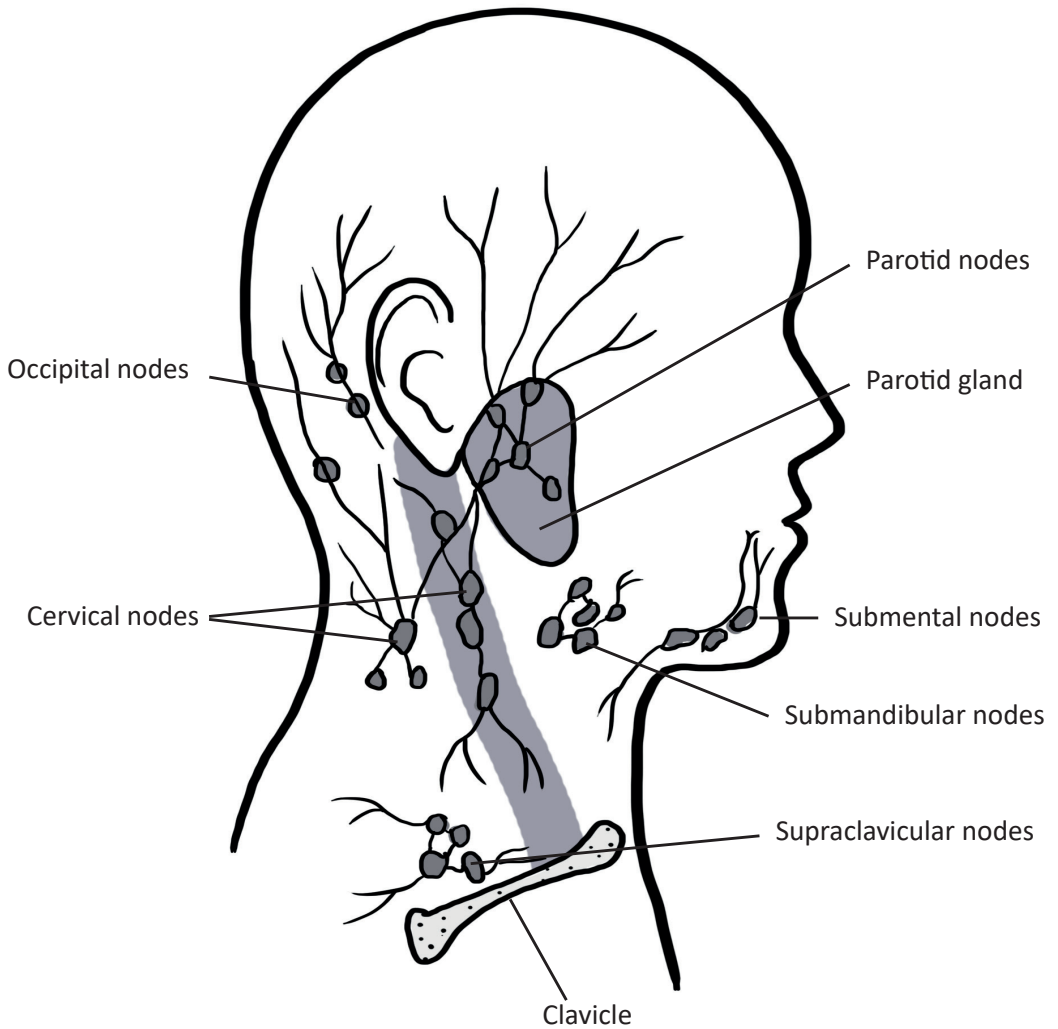
In order to understand lymphoedema you need to know a little bit about the lymphatic system.

The lymphatic system is a network of vessels (tubes) and nodes (glands) that cover the body and drain fluid from the tissues into the blood stream. The lymph vessels collect extra fluid, protein and waste material from the body tissues and transport it through the lymph nodes back into the blood. The lymph nodes filter the fluid of any unwanted material and make special cells that help the body fight infection.



**the Lymphatic System**

# Lymph nodes (glands) of the head



# What is lymphoedema

Lymphoedema is a swelling in the tissues below the skin that occurs when the lymphatic fluid cannot drain away. Lymphoedema can happen anywhere on the affected side of your body. This can happen if the lymphatic system is damaged or blocked. Similarly, if lymph nodes are removed as part of cancer surgery this can also block the normal drainage pathway. Lymphatic vessels and nodes can also be damaged by the cancer and also by any scarring that follows after surgery or radiotherapy. If lymphoedema fluid is dammed behind the blockage and builds up in the surrounding tissues this can also result in tissue swelling.

Other causes that may interrupt or damage the Lymphatic system include:

- Surgery
- Infection
- Severe injury
- Burns
- A congenital or hereditary abnormality

## NOT ALL LYMPHOEDEMA IS CANCER RELATED

# How is lymphoedema managed?

We manage lymphoedema in a structured way. Below are listed the 4 key elements to the treatment we recommend. Although lymphoedema cannot be cured, it can be managed by a combination of these essential elements.

## **Skin care (see advice)**

To reduce the risk of making the swelling worse, take special care not to injure your skin or introduce infection.

## **Exercise**

Gentle exercise will activate the muscles which help pump lymph fluid out of your head and neck areas.

## **Simple Lymph Drainage**

Simple lymph drainage is used to stimulate the drainage of lymph in the lymph vessels to other parts of the body.

## **Hosiery**

If appropriate, wearing a specially designed garment will reduce the collection of lymph fluid in your head and neck and assist your muscles to pump it away.

## Taking care of your skin

Good skin care plays a vital part in the treatment of the swollen areas on your head or neck. Stretched skin can become dry and cracked and any break or injury to the skin is a potential entry for bacteria which thrive in the warm, protein-rich fluid of the swelling.

Prevention of infection in the skin tissues is of great importance. Not only is an infection unpleasant and painful, but it may also cause the swelling to get worse. Any infection should be treated promptly with a two week course of antibiotics. So if you think you may be developing an infection see your doctor immediately. If you do have an infection, discontinue the use of any compression garments and stop massage or exercise until it is better.

Some people who suffer repeated infections may be prescribed a small but continuous dose of antibiotics over a long period of time as a preventative treatment. If infection tends to be a problem, it may be advisable to take an emergency supply of antibiotics with you, especially if you are going on holiday, just in case they are needed. Your doctor will advise you.

You may hear the term acute inflammatory episode (AIE) or cellulitis. These are commonly used words which refer to an infection of the skin tissues.

**On the next page are some useful tips  
for good skin care and mouth care.**

## Tips for good skin care and reducing the risk of infection

Things to AVOID	Things to USE
Dry skin, skin tightness and perfumed soaps	Wash daily and moisturise your skin with good moisturising cream recommended by your nurse or therapist.
Infection	Check your face and neck daily for signs of infection.
Razors	Use electric razors.
Cuts and scratches	Wear gloves when cleaning or doing jobs in the garden and wear hats to protect your head. Always wash wounds and apply antiseptic cream. This includes scratches from pets.
Insect bites	Use insect repellents and apply antihistamine cream if you get bitten.
Sunburn and sun brightness	Wear a hat and use high factor sun creams especially to the face, head and back of neck. Wear sunglasses to protect your eyelids.
Restrictive clothing	Wear loose fitting clothing around your neck area.

### Mouth care

- Pay close attention to oral hygiene, regularly clean your teeth especially after food and visit your dentist every 6 months
- Floss your teeth if you are able to
- Use a gentle mouthwash, check with your doctor for the best treatment for you
- Apply lip balm to your lips to keep them hydrated
- Treat mouth ulcers, check with your doctor for the best treatment for you
- Inform your dentist of your diagnosis and treatment plan

## Exercises

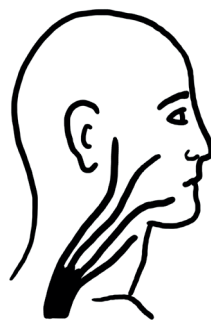
- Exercise is important for helping to drain lymph fluid away since muscles help to pump the lymph out of the affected area. Very vigorous exercise however, causes an increased blood supply, consequently forming more fluids in the tissues
- Try to do gentle, regular exercise rather than intensive bursts, at least twice a day
- Do the exercises slowly, rhythmically and gently
- The muscles in your face and neck can play a vital role in helping to drain fluid away
- Exaggerated facial expressions are an easy way in which to do this as well as poking out your tongue

## Other exercises to help with head and neck movement

- Move your head from side to side attempting to look over your shoulder
- Move your head up and down, gently bringing your head up and gently stretching it backwards
- Move your head slowly around in circles
- Shrug your shoulders up and down
- Shrug your shoulders forwards and backwards
- Move your tongue (if able) around the gums on the inside and outside of your teeth. From the very back to the front
- Massage the inside of your mouth with your tongue
- Chewing is also a very easy way in which to help with exercise. Chewing on sugar free chewing gum if you are able to can help
- Facial swelling can be worse in the morning following sleep, so propping the bed up at the head end will encourage the drainage of fluid

## Lymphoedema taping

Your specialist nurse may decide to apply lymphoedema tape to your face. An example is illustrated below:



As the face, head and neck moves throughout the day, the tape that has been applied to the skin will gently massage the tiny lymphatics which are just below the surface of the skin. This will encourage them to drain the fluid away from the swelling.

You will be given a diagram of how your own lymphoedema taping is applied. This can be attached to this page, if necessary.

## Simple lymph drainage for head and neck

Simple Lymph Drainage massage (SLD) is a special form of massage used to help people with Lymphoedema and is based on the principles of manual Lymphatic Drainage. The aim of SLD is to move lymph fluid to other areas of the body where it can drain away more easily.

- The massage should be very gentle and light, just enough pressure to move the skin and should not cause any redness
- The massage should be slow and rhythmical with your hand relaxed
- You should spend about 15-20 minutes doing the massage, twice a day
- The massage should be done on bare skin, not over clothes and do not use any oils or creams
- Make sure you are in a comfortable position, and in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed
- It is fine for someone else to help you with the massage if you wish

Please bring this booklet with you. Your nurse specialist will tailor the SLD to suit your swelling, giving you precise directions and diagrams to follow.

You will be given diagrams which show your own prescription for Simple Lymphatic Drainage which can be attached to this page at your appointment.

# Simple lymphatic drainage instructions for your head and neck swelling

**Special Instructions:**

## Compression hosiery

Compression garments are worn to help limit the formation of lymph fluid and to provide resistance against which the muscles can pump and move the fluid more effectively. Garments may help to reduce the oedema (swelling) and maintain the reduction.

In some cases the nurse specialist may measure your head and neck for compression garments especially if there are very stubborn areas of swelling.

This will be discussed with you at your appointment.

If you have a camera phone or camcorder, you might find it useful to record exercises such as lymphoedema taping and simple lymph drainage techniques but it is not essential. When you attend your appointment we will help you do this.

### **Special Instructions:**

## Sources of information and support

**Cancer BACUP**, 3 Bath Place, Rivington Street, London, EC2A 3JR

Tel: 0207 6969003

Cancer Information Service: 0808 8001234 (freephone) or 0207 7392280

Website: [www.cancerbacup.co.uk](http://www.cancerbacup.co.uk)

Helps patients, their families and friends cope with cancer. Trained cancer nurses provide information, emotional support and practical advice by phone and letter.

Over 50 publications on cancer, its treatment and practical issues of coping.

**Macmillan Cancer Relief**, 89 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7UQ

Tel: 0207 8407840

Macmillan Cancerline: 0808 8082020 (freephone)

Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Provides free information and emotional support for people living with cancer and information about UK cancer support groups and organisations.

**Disabled Living Foundation**, 380 - 384 Harrow Road, London, W9 2HU

Helpline 0845 1309177 (local rate Mon-Fri 10am - 1pm)

Textphone: 0870 6039176

Website: [www.dif.org.uk](http://www.dif.org.uk)

National resources for information about equipment to help people with a disability carry out daily living activities.

**British Association for Lymphoedema Support Network (LSN)**,

St. Luke's Crypt, Sydney Street, London, SW3 6NH

Helpline: 0207 3514480

Fax: 0207 3499809

Website: [www.lymphoedema.org/lzn](http://www.lymphoedema.org/lzn)

The LSN is a national charity that provides telephone information and support to people with lymphoedema. It also produces a quarterly newsletter and a wide range of fact sheets.

**MLD UK**, P.O. Box 14491, Glenrothes, Fife, KY6 3YE

Tel: 01592 748008

Website: [www.mlduk.org.uk](http://www.mlduk.org.uk)

**Changing Faces**, The Squire Centre, 33 - 37 University Street, London, WC1E 6JN

Tel: 0845 4500275 or 0207 3919270

Email: [info@changingfaces.org.uk](mailto:info@changingfaces.org.uk)

Website: [www.changingfaces.org.uk](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk)

An organisation which will help you to find a manual lymph drainage therapist in your area.

**St Margaret's Hospice Care Taunton Hospice,**  
Heron Drive, Bishops Hull, Taunton, TA1 5HA

 01823 333822

**St Margaret's Hospice Care Yeovil Hospice,**  
Little Tarrat Lane, Yeovil, BA20 2HU

 01935 709480

 [somicb.lym-smh@nhs.net](mailto:somicb.lym-smh@nhs.net)

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St Margaret's Hospice Care is committed to taking your privacy seriously and protecting your personal information. If you want to know more about how we use your data go on the 'privacy statement' on our website or ask for a copy of this information via [info@st-margarets-hospice.org.uk](mailto:info@st-margarets-hospice.org.uk)

Please note all incoming and outgoing calls may be recorded for training and quality purposes.

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