

# How to do Lymphatic Self-Massage on Your Face, Head and Neck

**For patients of Princess Margaret Cancer Centre who were treated for head and neck cancer with:**

- **Surgery to remove a tumour(s) or lymph nodes**
- **Radiation therapy**

Read this resource to learn:

- What is your lymphatic system
- What lymphatic self-massage is and why it is important
- How to do lymphatic self-massage step-by-step



## What is your lymphatic system?

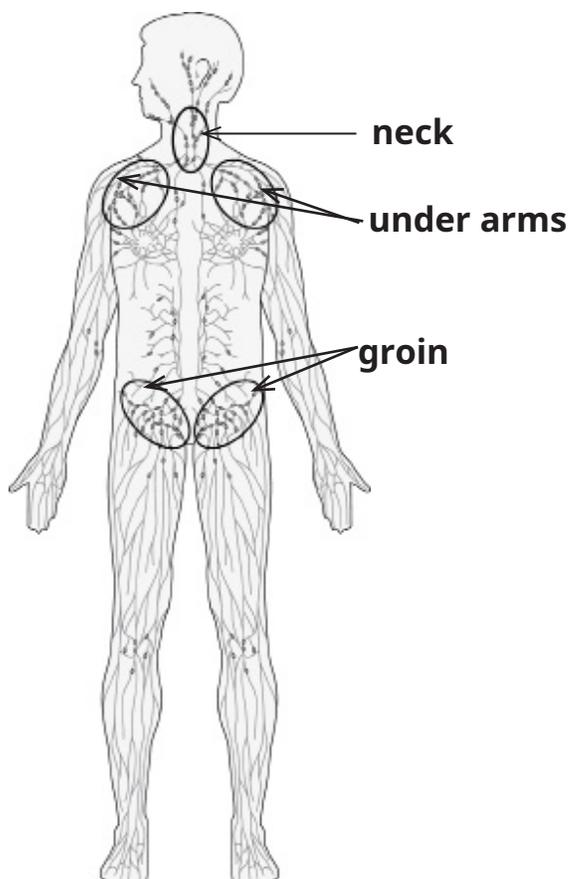
Your lymphatic system filters and removes extra fluid and waste from your body. It plays an important role in your immune function. Your lymphatic system is made up of many lymph nodes that are connected together by lymph vessels.

Your lymph nodes are bean-shaped organs that are found all over your body. Large groups or chains of lymph nodes can be found in your neck, under your arms and in your groin (see the image below).

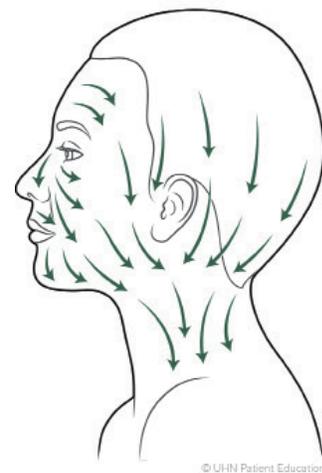
Surgery or radiation to your lymph nodes damage your lymph nodes and vessels. This damage prevents fluid from flowing well and causes swelling. Swelling from damaged lymph nodes and vessels is called lymphedema.

### The lymphatic system

**Lymph node clusters in the:**



Flow of lymph fluid



The image above shows the normal flow of fluid in the face, head and neck.

## What is lymphatic self-massage and why is it important?

Lymphatic self-massage is a gentle skin massage where the skin is gently stretched and released along lymph pathways. Lymphatic self-massage helps move extra fluid from swollen areas damaged by cancer treatment. This extra fluid can be moved into an area where the lymph nodes are working well.

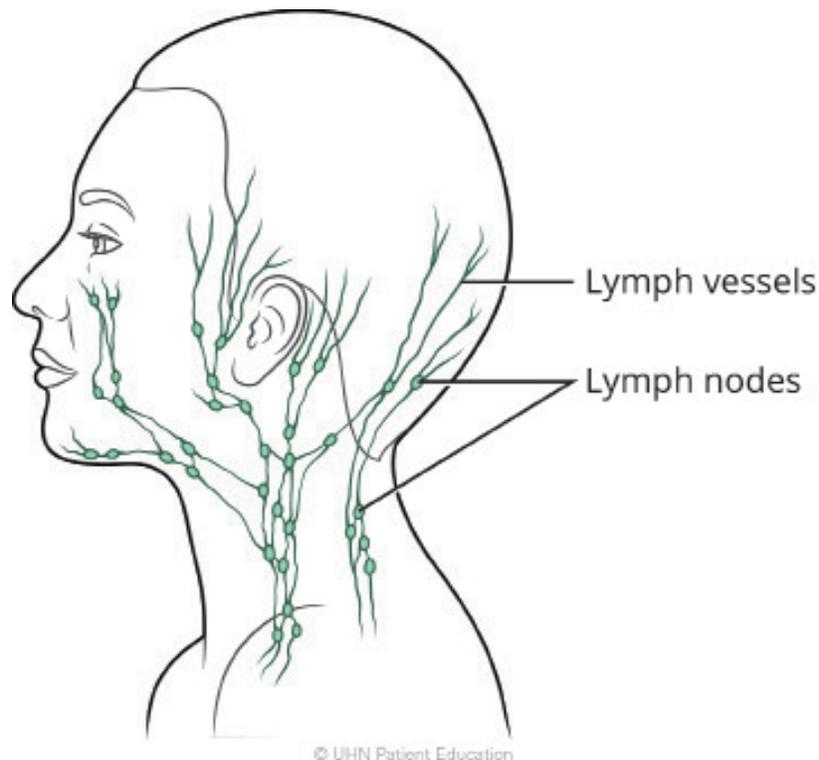
Lymphatic self-massage can help soften and move extra fluid away from:

- areas of your face that have had treatment
- areas of your neck that have had treatment

Lymphatic self-massage can help to move extra fluid to:

- lymph vessels and lymph nodes in areas of your face or neck not affected by treatment
- lymph vessels and lymph nodes in your underarms

The image below shows the lymph nodes and lymph vessels in the face, head and neck.



## How to do lymphatic self-massage

- Keep your hands soft and relaxed. Use a light pressure on your skin. The pressure of your hands should be just enough to gently **stretch** the skin. Only stretch the skin as far as it can go naturally without causing pain. Release the pressure and let your skin come back as it was. If you can feel your muscles under your skin you are pressing too hard.
- Use the flat part of your hands (palms and fingers) instead of your fingertips. Your palms allow more contact with the skin to stimulate (pump) the lymph vessels.
- Massage towards areas of your body that have not been treated for cancer such as your chest and underarms.
- Make sure you are in a comfortable position with good posture. You can self-massage while sitting, standing or lying down. Choose a position that is most comfortable for you.
- Massage when you are comfortably warm or when you are in a nice, warm room. If your muscles are warm, they are more flexible.
- Do self-massage regularly. You can use self-massage as time to relax, breathe, and take care of yourself.

## What to avoid

- ✗ Do not strain your shoulders, neck, arm or hand
- ✗ Do not self-massage if it causes pain
- ✗ Do not do self-massage if you have an infection in the area that has swelling

**Important: Do not do self-massage if you think you have an infection. Infections can occur more easily in your head, neck or face where your lymph nodes have been removed or you have had radiation.**

### **Signs that an area may be infected are:**

- Swelling in these areas and changes in the colour of the skin
  - In darker skin tones, the skin may appear more purple, gray, or may not change colour at all. In lighter skin tones, the skin may appear red. This redness can quickly spread.
- Skin becoming raised, thick or pitted.
- Feeling of tenderness and/or warmth in the affected area.
- Having a fever or chills and feeling unwell.

If you think you have an infection, get medical attention right away. You may go to:

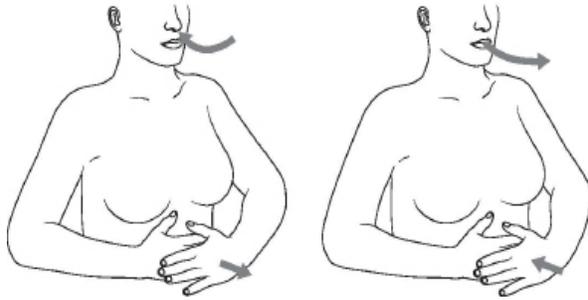
- Your family doctor
- Walk-in Clinic
- Urgent Care Clinic
- Emergency department

**If you have had an infection, only start self-massage again when the antibiotics (medicine) are taking effects, your infection is improving, and it is comfortable for you to do so.** Or if your doctor says it is okay to start again.

Try different ways to make self-massage a part of your routine. Try self-massage while you are watching TV or having a shower so it does not take time away from your day. Try to make self-massage a time for yourself. Or make it a part of your routine for relaxing

Below are the steps for doing a lymphatic self-massage. Follow the instructions closely. Talk to your health care team if you have any questions.

## 1. Deep breathing

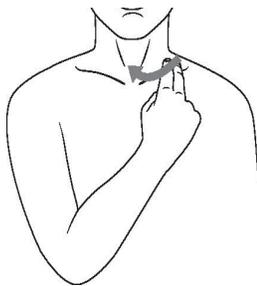


Deep breathing is an important part of your self-care. Deep breathing works like a pump in your body. This pump helps the lymph nodes and vessels move fluid. You can practice deep breathing at any time!

What to do:

- Place the palms of both hands on your stomach.
- Take a deep breath in through your nose until your stomach pushes against your hands.
- Breathe out slowly through pursed lips (like you are blowing out candles). Then let your stomach go flat.
- Repeat 5 times. Take a short rest between each breath so you do not feel dizzy.

## 2. Stretch and release the skin at the front of your neck

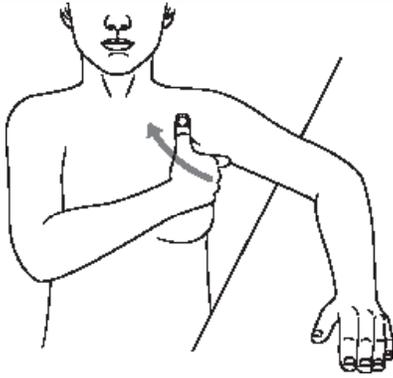


This motion helps lymph fluid drain back to your heart. You can massage one side at a time.

What to do:

- Place the flats of your 2nd and 3rd fingers on one side of your neck just above your collarbone.
- Massage down and inwards toward your collarbone. Always keep your fingers above your collarbone. Start massage on the area of your neck that is close to your shoulder and gently stretch the skin towards the middle of your neck.
- Gently stretch the skin just as far as it goes without pain. Then let go of the skin.
- This massage will look like the letter “J”.
- Repeat 10 – 15 times on each side.

### 3. Prepare your underarm lymph nodes



This prepares the lymph vessels and nodes under your arm to take in lymph fluid from your face and neck. Place your arm in a comfortable position. Your arm should be slightly raised and supported. You may want to place your arm on an armrest or table for comfort.

What to do:

- Place your palm of your opposite hand against your underarm.
- Gently pull up and in toward your body, then release. Pause for a moment and then start again. Repeat 10 – 15 times
- Do the same pumping on your other underarm. Repeat 10 – 15 times.

### 4. Stretch and release the skin from your chest to your underarm



#### **Chest to underarm**

Place your flat, relaxed, hand on your collarbone. Move your hand down your chest toward your underarm. Massage your chest to help reduce swelling. This massage will move the lymph fluid from your neck and chest to your underarm lymph vessels and nodes.

What to do:

- Place your hand over your collar bone
- Gently stretch the skin (not muscles) down your chest and towards your underarm. Then let go of the skin. Pause for a moment. Now repeat this massage stroke as you gradually move your hand down your chest towards your underarm.
- Repeat this massage 10 – 15 times.

## 5. Stretch and release the skin from the front of your neck to your chest



### Neck to chest

Massage the front of your neck to help reduce swelling. This massage will move the lymph fluid from your neck to your chest.

Place your hand on the front of your neck where you have swelling. Move your hand down your neck towards your collar bone and chest in short strokes.

### What to do:

- Place your hand over the swelling at the front of your neck
- Gently stretch the skin (not muscles) towards your collarbone. Then let go of the skin. Pause for a moment. Now repeat this massage stroke as you gradually move your hand past your collar bone and down your chest.
- Repeat this massage 10 – 15 times.

## 6. Stretch and release the skin at the side of your neck

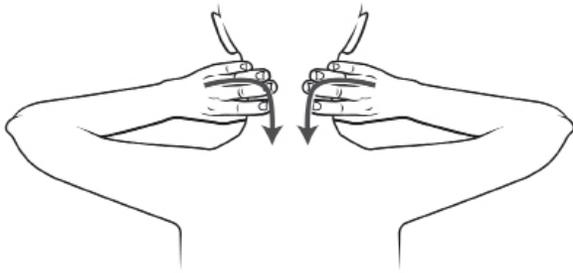


Massage the side of your neck to lower or prevent the swelling in your face and neck. This massage helps stimulate (pump) the vessels at the side of your neck. **Do not** massage both sides of your neck at the same time if you have radiation treatment. Do one side at a time.

### What to do:

- Place your hand flat on the side of your neck (for example, right hand to the right side of the neck). If this is uncomfortable or difficult, try the opposite hand (left hand to the right side of neck).
- Gently stretch the skin towards the back of your neck and down. Then release.
- Massage your neck and side of the face in a slow and gentle way.
- Repeat 10 – 15 times.

## 7. Stretch and release the skin on the back of your neck



Massage the back of your neck to lower or prevent the swelling in your face and neck. This massage helps stimulate (pump) the vessels at the back of your neck.

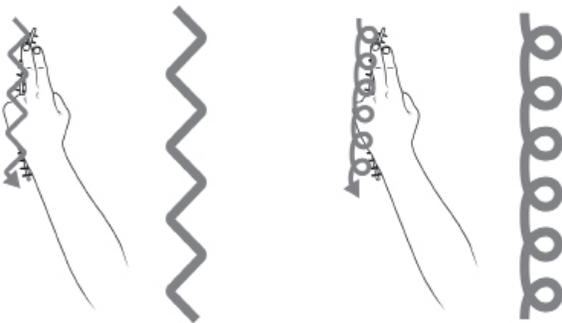
What to do:

- Place the palms of your hands on the back of your neck, just below your hairline.
- Stretch the skin towards your spine and then down towards your back.
- Repeat 10 – 15 times.

## 8. Massage your scar

Zigzag motion

Circle motion



Massage your scar. This massage is only if you have had surgery. Do not massage until three weeks after surgery and the scar is well healed. Do not massage until all staples and clips have been removed. Your scar may feel very sensitive, tight or itchy. Scar massage will help reduce these feelings.

This massage helps soften the scar and allows better blood flow to the area. Scar massage should always be pain-free. Do not use oil while doing the scar massage. Apply any lotions or oils after the massage. This part of the massage may involve firmer pressure than the other steps.

What to do:

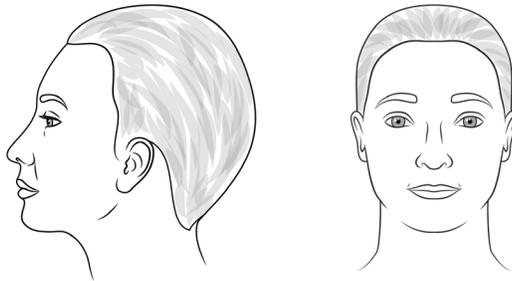
- Place the palm of your hand over the scar.
- Move up and down in a zigzag pattern or circle pattern along the scar. See pictures above for help.
- Apply firm but gentle pressure while moving along the scar. Try to move the skin.
- If possible, gently lift the skin along the scar.
- Repeat 5 or 6 times on the scar.
- Now place your fingertips just above the scar. Gently stretch the skin away from the scar and release.
- Repeat 5 times.
- Place your fingertips below the scar. Gently stretch the skin away from the scar. Then release the skin.
- Repeat 5 times.

If your skin and swollen tissue in your neck or face feels hard, ask your therapist to show you gentle kneading techniques to help soften the firm tissue. Softening firm areas helps improve lymph drainage.

Here is how you will soften the firm tissue on your own at home:

- Gently place the pads of your fingers on the tissue or skin that feels firm or hard.
- Gently press down with the pads of your fingers and let go. As you release the pressure, move your fingers down slightly.
- Repeat 10 – 15 times in one area. Move to another area and repeat.

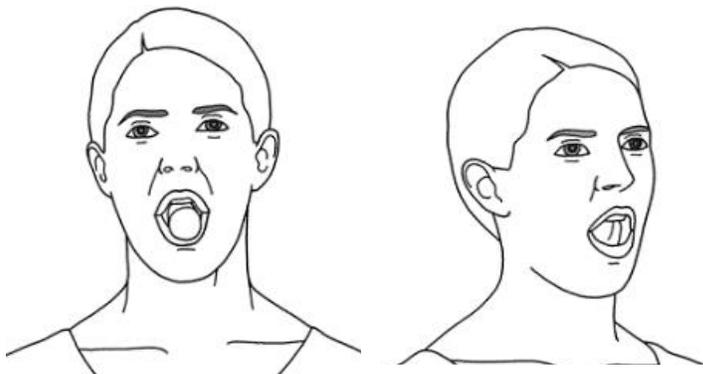
### 9. Massage for face swelling



Your therapist will draw arrows on the image. This will show you the way you should do your self-massage.

**Notes:**

### 10. Massage for swelling inside the mouth

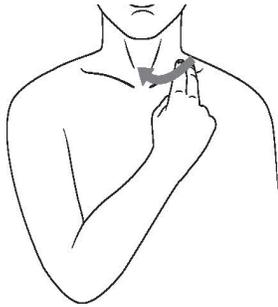


Your therapist will draw arrows on the image. This will show you the way you should do your self-massage.

- Do not massage inside your mouth if you have any sores or cuts or pain.
- Make sure your hand is clean before you start to massage inside your mouth.

**Notes:**

## 11. Stretch and release the skin at the front of your neck



This motion helps lymph fluid drain back to your heart. Massage one side at a time if you have had radiation.

### What to do:

- Place the flats of your 2nd and 3rd fingers on either side of your neck just above your collarbone.
- Massage down and inwards toward your collarbone. Always keep your fingers above your collarbone. Start massage on the area of your neck that is close to your shoulder and gently stretch the skin towards the middle of your neck.
- Gently stretch the skin just as far as it goes without pain. Then let go of the skin.
- This massage will look like the letter “J”.
- Repeat 15 times on each side.

## Contact information

If you have questions about self-lymphatic massage, contact the Survivorship Clinic at 416 946 4501, ext. 2363 and ask to speak to a Combined Decongestive Therapist (CDT).

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