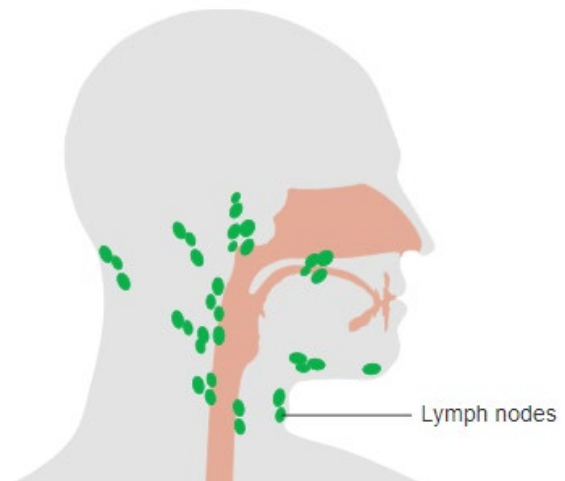


Head and Neck Lymphedema

What is head and neck lymphedema?

Lymphedema is swelling caused by damage to the lymphatic system. The **lymphatic system** is a large network of vessels (channels) that move fluid throughout your body. The lymphatic system is part of the immune system, because the **lymph fluid** is made of white blood cells that attack bacteria in your blood and body tissues.



Lymph nodes are small round structures that filter the lymph fluid. There are around 200 lymph nodes in the head and neck area. These may be damaged or removed because of cancer or cancer treatments, causing **head and neck lymphedema**.

What are the signs and symptoms of head and neck lymphedema?

- Swelling of your neck, face, lips, tongue, and inside your mouth
- Changes in your skin texture or firmness
- Feelings of achiness (pain and soreness), heaviness, tightness, or fullness in the head and neck area or in other parts of your body

What causes head and neck lymphedema?

When the lymph nodes in your head and neck are damaged, fluid cannot move easily from the area and builds up over time. This causes head and neck

lymphedema. Based on the latest research, up to 50% of head and neck cancer patients develop lymphedema.

What is the treatment for head and neck lymphedema?

Head and neck lymphedema can be treated with **complete decongestive therapy (CDT)** with a Certified Lymphedema Therapist (CLT). CDT includes:

- **Manual lymph drainage** - a gentle skin stretching massage to move fluid from the head and neck.
- **Compression therapy** - applies pressure and reduces swelling in the head and neck.
- **Exercise** - increases range of motion in the head and neck, prevents stiffness, and helps reduce swelling.
- **Skin care** - daily skin cleansing and moisturizing prevents infections and keeps skin in good condition.

When should I contact my doctor about lymphedema treatment?

You can contact your doctor for a lymphedema treatment referral if you have any of the following problems with lymphedema:

- Symptoms after cancer treatment (like surgery or radiation) that last over a month.
- Symptoms that interfere with your functioning - this can include making it hard for you to do your daily activities (like dressing, grooming, bathing, or sleeping).
- Symptoms that affect your self-esteem (the way you feel about yourself), your body image (how you feel about how you look), or your social interactions (how you connect and spend time with other people).

Helpful tips to reduce head and neck lymphedema symptoms:

- If possible, sleep on a slight incline (with your head raised up a little higher than the rest of your body). This will help prevent bad swelling in the morning from lying flat overnight.
- Make sure to complete any prescribed exercises to improve your range of motion, once your doctor says you're okay to do them.
- Do not wear tight-fitting clothing or jewelry around your neck.
- Be extra careful when shaving around your head and neck, and think about using an electric razor to reduce your risk of cuts or nicks to your skin.

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by University of Michigan (U-M) Health for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by U-M Health and for which U-M Health does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition or your treatment plan.

Author: Katelin Iott, OTD OTRL CLT-LANA

Edited by: Brittany Batell, MPH MSW

Image attribution: "[Diagram showing the lymph nodes in the head and neck](#)" by [Cancer Research UK](#) is licensed under the [CC BY-SA 4.0 International](#) license.

Patient Education by [U-M Health](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License](#). Last Revised 07/2023