Exercises After Your Neck Surgery

This information will teach you how to do neck and shoulder exercises after your neck surgery.

About Exercising After Your Neck Surgery

After surgery, your neck and shoulder on the surgical side (involved side) may feel tight and weak. The exercises in this resource will help make your neck and shoulder muscles stronger and more flexible. This will help you regain your shoulder and neck movement and function.

Following your doctor’s instructions for when to begin these exercises is important for your recovery. It may also affect how well your shoulder and neck will work in the future.

If doing these exercises cause you any pain, nausea, dizziness, swelling, or discomfort, stop right away and call your doctor.

Tips for Your Daily Life

While you’re recovering, doing your daily activities may be harder for you. Follow the tips below for help.

- Always keep your shoulders back and relaxed, and your head
retracted (pulled back) for good posture. This prevents you from having tightness in your chest muscles and straining your neck and shoulder muscles.

- If you have weakness on your involved side, support your arm on a table or armrest when sitting. While standing, rest your involved hand on your hip or in your pocket to ease the weight of that arm on your shoulder. This helps prevent pulling on the muscles and other parts of your neck and shoulder.

- Lie on your back as much as possible when sleeping. If you must lie on your uninvolved side, rest the arm of your involved side on a pillow in front of you to prevent pulling at your shoulder. Avoid lying on your involved side unless your nurse or doctor says it’s okay.

- Don’t lift or carry anything heavier than 3 pounds (1.4 kilograms) on your involved side until you can do so without any pain. For your reference, a steam iron weighs around 3 pounds while a half gallon of milk is 4 pounds. Talk with your doctor or nurse before lifting or carrying things over 3 pounds.

- Avoid carrying a heavy shoulder bag or purse on your involved side. Check with your doctor or nurse before you try to carry a backpack or knapsack.

**Exercise Tips**

Doing exercises after your neck surgery can help you heal after
your neck surgery. Follow these tips when doing your exercises.

- Breathe normally and don’t hold your breath during the exercises.
- Do the exercises slowly and smoothly. Avoid fast or jerky movements.
- You may want to check your movements in a mirror to make sure that you have good posture.
- Stop any exercise causes you any pain, nausea, dizziness, swelling, or discomfort, stop right away and call your doctor.

Exercises

This section shows the exercises you should do after your neck surgery. **Start these exercises only when your doctor or nurse tell you that it’s safe to do them and that your incision (surgical cut) has healed well enough.**

Do these exercises at least 2 times a day for 3 months. If you’re able to move your shoulder and get full motion of your neck back before 3 months, ask your doctor if you can stop the exercises. If you can’t move your neck or shoulder after 3 months, tell your doctor.

**Turning neck stretch**

1. Gently turn your head so you’re looking up to the right.
2. Place your right hand on your left cheek and jaw. Apply mild pressure to give yourself a deeper stretch (see Figure 1).

3. Turn your head back to look down and to your left.

4. Place your left hand on top of your head and gently apply pressure (see Figure 1).

5. Repeat these 10 times. Then repeat this movement in the other direction 10 times.

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**Chin tuck**

1. Sit or stand with your back and head leaning against the wall for good posture.

2. Tuck your chin in and try to flatten the back of your neck against the wall (see Figure 2).

3. Return to the starting position.

4. Repeat 10 times.
**Side neck stretch**

1. Sit or stand and point your right arm downward.
2. Place your left hand on the top of your head.
3. Gently pull down your head to the left, to stretch the muscles on the right side of your neck (see Figure 3).
4. Hold for 30 seconds then release.
5. Repeat 5 times.
6. Repeat on the other side of your neck.

**Shoulder shrugs**

1. Shrug your shoulders up toward your ears (see Figure 4).
2. Drop them down.
3. Repeat 10 times.

**Arm circles**

1. Sit or stand with your arms at your side, with your palms facing forward and your thumbs pointing to the ceiling.
2. Lift your arms up and circle them backwards (see Figure 5).
3. Return to the starting position.
4. Repeat 10 times.

Arm and shoulder retraction

1. Sit or stand with your arms in front of you and your thumbs up.
2. Move your arms out to the sides, while squeezing your shoulder blades together (see Figure 6).
3. Return to the starting position.
4. Repeat 10 times.

Pectoral stretch using doorway

1. Stand in a doorway.
2. Place your hands and forearms at shoulder level on the sides of the doorway (see Figure 7).

3. Gently step forward until you feel a gentle stretch across your chest and in front of your shoulders. Keep your back straight and your neck and shoulders relaxed.

4. Hold for 30 seconds.

5. Return to the starting position.

6. Repeat 5 times.

Jaw lowering

1. Sit or stand by a mirror so that you can see your face.

2. Place the tip of your tongue behind your top teeth.

3. Slowly lower your bottom jaw to open your mouth, while keeping your tongue in contact with the roof of your mouth (see Figure 8). Use the mirror to make sure that you’re opening your mouth evenly, and not moving your jaw from side to side.

4. Close your mouth.
Diaphragmatic breathing

1. Lie on your back or sit in a supportive chair.
2. Place one or both of your hands over your abdomen (belly, see Figure 9).
3. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose. Your abdomen should rise but your upper chest should remain still and relaxed.
4. Breathe out slowly through your mouth. As you breathe out, slowly and gently pull your abdomen towards your spine.
5. Repeat 10 times.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.