

RELIEF FOR HEAD AND NECK CANCER PATIENTS WITH MOUTH EXERCISES:

Background:

Around 6,800 patients were diagnosed with cancer of the mouth in the UK in 2011. Standard treatment varies but may involve surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

Patients can develop a reduction in mouth opening called trismus from their disease or as a result of treatment. Trismus affects the jaw muscles and makes mouth opening difficult. This can result in problems with eating, swallowing, speaking, oral health, dental integrity, nutrition and can affect breathing. Radiotherapy would be expected to worsen trismus. To potentially combat trismus, patients could undertake jaw stretching exercises before the mouth opening starts to get worst. This means starting exercises *before* radiotherapy. This is the first study of its kind to show that exercises can help and that it is safe to do the exercises before and whilst on radiotherapy treatment and to continue the exercises after radiotherapy treatment has finished.

Trial design:

The aim of this study was to examine whether prophylactic jaw exercises using the Therabite® (TB) (a hand operated device which fits inside a patients mouth) or wooden spatulas (WS) (lollipop sticks stacked in a patients mouth) will relieve or prevent tightening of the jaw following radiotherapy. All patients had some sense of jaw tightening prior to study entry. Measurements of jaw opening were taken pre and post radiotherapy.

The study was designed to give an indication about the benefit of exercises and to inform feasibility to conduct a larger study. Factors such as compliance with the daily exercise regime, quality of life and health economics were questions the feasibility study was designed to address.

37 patients were randomised to receive the Therabite device and 34 the Wooden Spatulas for jaw exercises.



Findings: The study has shown that mouth openings had increased on average in both groups following the exercise intervention. There was no statistically significant difference between the wooden spatulas or the Therabite. They both helped with improved mouth opening although the wooden spatulas are cheaper.

Conclusions: Prophylactic exercises during and after radiotherapy treatment can improve mouth opening in many mouth cancers. Before talking to your medical teams : The exercise regime is stretching 5 times, with 30seconds hold, 3 times a day.

Lessons learnt: from speaking to patients over the telephone include some of the following comments: Allow patients to have more of a say in the exercise regimen for example reduce to 3 times a day. This will aid compliance.

Allow patients to take a variable break (up to 6 weeks) from the exercises when side effects of radiotherapy are at their worst. Then start exercises again to help further to improve or maintain mouth opening.

More regular contact to with the patients for encouragement and support from the medical teams.

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