

Patient Information

Physiotherapy following Breast Surgery

Physiotherapy Directorate

Keep this booklet as a reminder with your exercises long term.

If you start to develop stiffness, pain, weakness, or difficulty performing everyday tasks, contact your GP or breast care nurse. If appropriate they will arrange a referral to a musculoskeletal physiotherapist.

This booklet has been developed to help guide you through your post-operative rehabilitation.

If you have any questions or queries regarding any of the exercises or information provided, please contact your breast care nurse or physiotherapist.

It is very important to exercise your arm after breast surgery, as this will help you regain the full range of movement available at the shoulder, help with healing and reduce the risk of complications.

Immediately following your operation

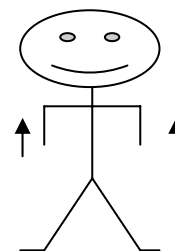
- When you wake up from your operation, you may find you have 2 drains attached. It is important to commence your exercises even with your drains in place. Only work within a comfortable range at this stage. Increase the range of movement as your pain allows.
- Your doctor will have prescribed you painkillers, make sure you take these regularly. If your pain is well controlled, it will be easier for you to exercise and regain full movement at the affected shoulder more quickly.
- It is normal to feel a pulling sensation when exercising. Continue with your exercises but consult your breast care nurse, GP, or physiotherapist if you feel a new or sharp pain.
- A physiotherapist will have provided you with this booklet and will have explained the exercises for days 1-6. If you have any questions or queries regarding the exercises or information in the booklet, speak to the physiotherapist or breast care nurse.
- The aim is to achieve full range of movement at the affected shoulder within 2-4 weeks.

Days 1 – 6

- Use the affected arm as normally as possible within the limits of pain. But you **should not lift** anything heavier than a cup of tea with the operated arm.
- Use for everyday activities such as washing, grooming and eating.
- Maintain good posture during and after exercising. Occasionally walk with your hands clasped behind your back whilst pulling the shoulder blades together.
- It is very important to make the time for your exercises.
- Have a short rest between each set of exercises.
- Do the exercises slowly and smoothly. Do not do sudden and quick movements.
- For each exercise start doing 5 repetitions three times a day and build up to 10 repetitions three times a day.

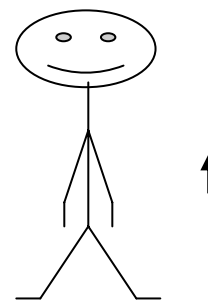
1. Shoulder Shrugging

Start sitting upright with your shoulders relaxed. Shrug both shoulders up towards your ears. Now lower them down as far as is comfortable. Return to your starting position. Repeat.



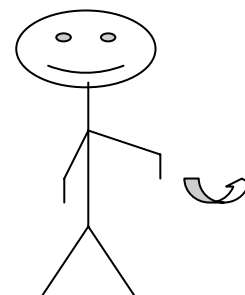
2. Arm forwards and up

Have both elbows straight, and hold your hands together out in front of you. Use your non-operated arm to do most of the work. Lift both arms forwards and up above your head, as comfort allows. Slowly lower to the starting position. Repeat. You may do this exercise sitting / standing or lying on your back.



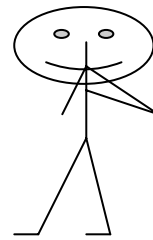
3. Arm out to the side

Straighten your operated arm and lift out to the side and up as far as comfort allows. Slowly return to the starting position. Repeat. You may do this exercise sitting, standing or lying on your non-operated side.



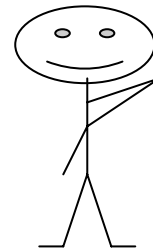
4. Hand behind back

With your operated arm try and reach as far behind your back as possible. As if you were going to do up your bra. Repeat.



5. Hand behind your head

With your operated arm try and reach down the back of your neck and in between your shoulder blades. Repeat.

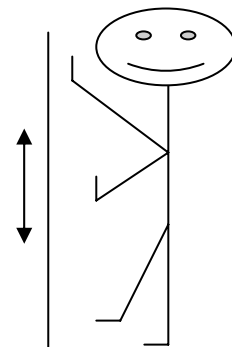


Days 7 – 14

- We can now think about progressing your exercises to try and achieve full range of movement in the affected shoulder and arm.
- If you are feeling well within yourself it is a good time to start going out for gentle walks.
- This will start working on your cardiovascular fitness.

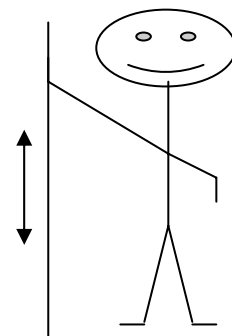
1. Sliding hand up the wall

Stand facing the wall. Place the palm of the operated arm flat on the wall. Maintain an upright posture. Slide the hand up the wall. Slowly lower to the starting position. You may need to place a cloth under your hand to help ease the slide up the wall. Repeat.



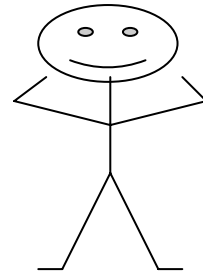
2. Sliding hand up the wall sideways

Stand with the operated side to the wall. Place the palm of the operated arm flat on the wall. Maintain an upright posture. Slide the hand up the wall. Slowly lower to the starting position. Repeat.



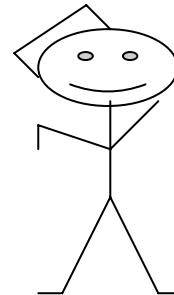
3. Opening out the chest

Lie flat on your back. Keep your shoulders relaxed and place both hands behind your head. Have both elbows pointing to the ceiling. Now let them drop out to the side slowly. You may at this stage feel a stretching sensation across your chest. Move within the limits of pain. Return slowly to the starting position. Repeat.



4. Hand to your opposite ear

With your operated arm try and reach over the top of your head and touch your opposite ear. Try to keep your neck and head straight. Repeat.



Days 15+

You should continue to do your exercises as for days 7-14. If by day 15-28 you have still not achieved your full range of movement on your operated arm, speak to your breast care nurse who may then refer you to out-patients physiotherapy for extra help.

Breast Reconstruction

For the **FIRST 4-5 days** following your reconstruction, there will be some **RESTRICTIONS** to your exercises.

- You should not raise your arm forwards and up or out to the side higher than the level of your shoulder.
- You should not rotate your arm.
- Following this time period, progress your exercises as per booklet as pain allows.

Cause of pain

- **Trauma from the operation**
You have just undergone a major operation. It will take a minimum of 8 - 12 weeks for things to settle down in the area of the operation. That is your chest, armpit, shoulder and arm.
- **Cording (applicable for axillary node clearance)**
If the lymph nodes in your axilla have been removed, there may be a hardening of the lymph vessels that run down the arm. This is known as 'cording' due to the appearance of cord like structures in the arm. This will eventually settle.

- **Irritation of nerves**

The nerves that travel into your arm pass through a narrow space in the front of your chest and armpit. Due to the close proximity of these nerves to the operation site, you can get irritation of these nerves resulting in pain.

- **Reduced range of movement at the shoulder**

If you nurse your arm after the operation and don't get it moving straight away, the shoulder joint may stiffen resulting in reduced function and pain.

Altered Sensation

You may encounter an area of numbness or tingling around the operation area. This will have been due to division / irritation of the nerve endings in the area. Nerves take a very long time to recover and these symptoms may persist for anything up to 12 – 18 months. In most cases you will be left with a small area of altered sensation, although you may have an area of numbness in your armpit that does not return.

Scar Management

When the wound has healed and there are no signs of infection, you can start massaging the scar and the area immediately surrounding it.

If you have had a mastectomy or reconstruction, it is advisable to massage the chest wall area as well.

You may use any moisturising cream such as vitamin E or E45.

Apply pressure, as is comfortable.

Massage will help keep the skin supple and in good condition. It will also prevent the sticking down of scar tissue, which can be a cause of pain and may also help to desensitize the scar.

You may experience itching sensations in the area around the scar; this is a normal sign of healing.

If the area becomes red, hot and angry looking, seek advice from your GP or breast care nurse.

General Advice

Posture

Watch your posture for the first 3-4 months following surgery. Avoid stooping and holding your arm across your tummy. Hold your shoulders back but relaxed.

Lifting

For the first 4-6 weeks following surgery you should only be lifting light objects (nothing heavier than a kettle). After this time you can gradually increase the amount you lift. You should be aware that lifting and carrying heavy objects may increase your risk of developing lymphoedema and therefore should be avoided if possible.

Driving

Wait until your first follow-up appointment with the doctor. Check with your insurance company that you will be covered. You should make sure you have full range of movement and any drains have been removed. You should be confident that you could steer and make an emergency stop if necessary.

Sports

Wait about 2 months before returning to sport. If you have undergone chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatment, it may be slightly longer before you feel ready to return. If unsure ask your physiotherapist or doctor for advice. Swimming is very good exercise but you need to make sure that the wound is fully healed beforehand and your doctor is happy if you are receiving other treatments.

Lymphoedema – (swelling of the hand / arm / breast)

- If your surgery has involved the removal of some or all of the lymph glands in your axilla, you may be at risk of developing lymphoedema.
- It can occur at anytime following surgery (weeks to years).
- It is important that you use your hand as normally as possible but taking precautions can help reduce the risk.

Precautions for Lymphoedema and maintaining good arm hygiene after axillary node clearance

- Treat even small grazes, cuts and burns with antiseptic and keep them clean until they heal
- Wear gloves for washing-up, DIY, gardening and if handling animals (this will help reduce the risk of scratches and cuts)
- Apply moisturising cream daily to keep skin supple
- Use an electric razor for shaving the armpit
- Use nail clippers instead of scissors for cutting nails
- Do not pull back or cut nail cuticles
- Use a thimble for sewing
- Do not lift heavy and carry heavy weights with the affected arm
- Try and avoid having your blood pressure taken on the operated arm
- Try and have blood tests or injections done on your non-operated arm

- Avoid getting sunburnt
- Try and avoid insect bites

If you notice any swelling of your arms, or skin becomes red and painful contact your breast care nurse or GP so that referral to the lymphoedema service can occur.

Notes
