

Advice following radiotherapy to your breast

This factsheet provides information and advice about shoulder exercises during and after radiotherapy to your breast. Please ask a member of the physiotherapy team if there is anything you do not understand or if you would like further information.

Effects of radiotherapy on the soft tissues

Radiotherapy to the breast and / or armpit can cause tightening or scarring of the muscles, joints and lymph vessels within the area treated, both during and after treatment. These changes will be ongoing following treatment for at least two years. This can lead to muscle and joint stiffness. Prior surgery can also cause long term scarring in the armpit and chest wall.

Why is it important to carry on with shoulder exercises following radiotherapy?

The main reasons are to prevent problems of:

- Shoulder stiffness
- Shoulder and / or neck pain
- Poor posture

It is possible to develop these problems at a later date, even if your shoulder movement is currently full. Continuing to maintain shoulder mobility and being aware of your posture will help to minimise these problems. Try to avoid sitting with your shoulders hunched or rounded forwards - instead relax your shoulders back and down to help 'open up' your chest area and elongate your neck.

What exercises should I do?

We advise you to stretch the soft tissues around your shoulder and chest area on a daily basis during and after radiotherapy. Continuing your stretching exercises indefinitely will help to minimise stiffness at a later date.

We suggest that you carry out the exercises once a day but if you notice that your shoulder is getting stiff we advise you to increase them to twice daily. You may wish to contact your GP for advice if stiffness and pain remain a problem.

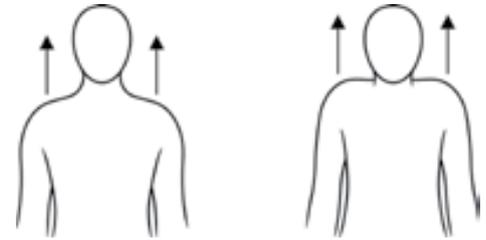


Exercises to maintain posture and shoulder mobility

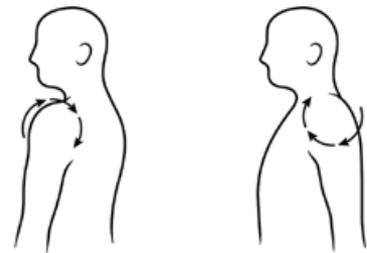
A. Warm-up exercises (for posture and to loosen your shoulder joint prior to stretching)

These exercises should be carried out in a sitting position. Repeat each exercise five times.

1. Sitting upright with your arms relaxed by your side, shrug your shoulders up towards your ears then slowly lower to the starting position.



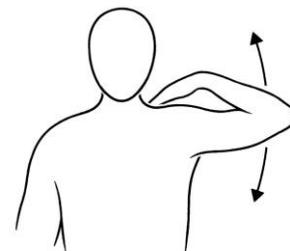
2. Sitting upright with your arms relaxed by your side, slowly rotate your shoulders backwards as far as comfortable.



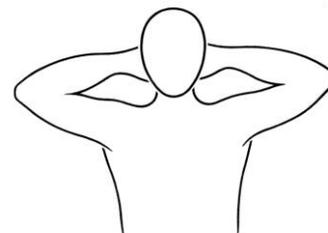
3. Place your hand on your shoulder. Raise your elbow forwards and then down.



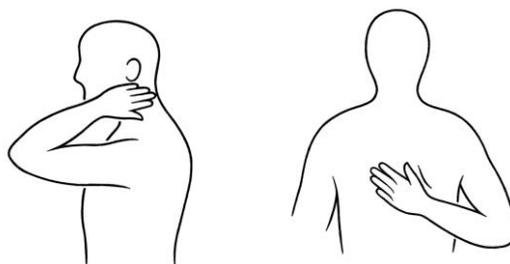
4. Place your hand on your shoulder. Raise your elbow up to the side and then down.



5. Clasp your hands behind your neck. Keeping your head up, stretch your elbows out to the side and then back to the middle.



6. Place your hand behind your back and reach up as far as possible between your shoulder blades.

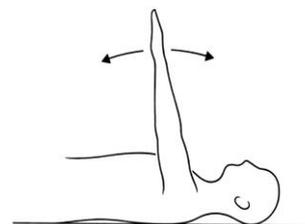


B. Stretching exercises (to stretch the soft tissues across the chest wall)

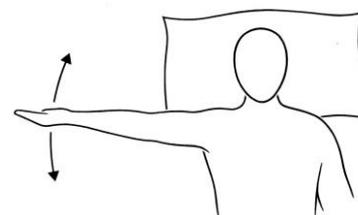
These exercises should be carried out lying down. Repeat each exercise three times

When you first lie down, allow your shoulders to relax into the bed.

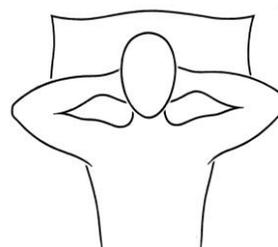
1. Start with your affected arm by your side and your elbow straight. Lift your arm forwards above your head, keeping your elbow straight. Give a gentle push with the other arm to gain a mild stretch. Hold for a count of 10 and then slowly bring your arm back down to your side. You may or may not need a pillow under your head depending on how flexible you are.



2. Start with your affected arm by your side. Lift your arm slowly out to the side, keeping your elbow as straight as you can, and continue up towards your head. Try to keep your arm close to the bed. Hold for up to 10 seconds if comfortable and then slowly bring your arm back down to your side.



3. Clasp your hands behind your neck with your elbows pointing towards the ceiling. Slowly lower your elbows out to the side until you feel a stretch or until they reach the bed. Hold for a count of 10 and then slowly bring the elbows back to the starting position.



General physical activity

Following breast cancer treatment, you may notice that your exercise tolerance has reduced. There is increasing evidence to suggest that becoming more active after treatment is beneficial and you should aim to gradually increase your physical activity which can help to:

- Improve or maintain your general fitness and control your weight
- Keep you mobile and preserve your independence
- Improve your mood and sense of well being
- Reduce the risk of recurrence with some forms of breast cancer and improve your general health.

The Department of Health recommends 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five times per week. This activity can take many different forms such as walking, housework, gardening, swimming and yoga. It does not need to be very energetic at first - the important thing is to keep moving and progress your activity over time. Taking the stairs instead of the lift or walking instead of driving short distances can make a real difference to your fitness levels.

You may wish to discuss this further with your hospital team, GP or physiotherapist.

Contact details

Physiotherapy Department:	Chelsea	020 7808 2821 (answer phone)
	Sutton	020 8661 3005 (answer phone)
The Royal Marsden Hotline: (Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week)		020 8915 6899

