

The ROYAL MARSDEN

NHS Foundation Trust

Exercise and advice following breast surgery

Physiotherapy

Patient Information



NHS

Introduction

After you have had an operation on your breast and armpit (axilla), you may feel reluctant to move your arm. In order to regain full use of it as soon as possible, it is important to do the exercises recommended in this booklet.

We recognise that there is lots of information to take on at this time. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us (contact details on page 14). This is particularly important if you are worried about pain or stiffness in your shoulder, or if you have any questions about the exercises. There are no silly questions.

The exercises are performed in three stages:

Set A

Set B

Set C

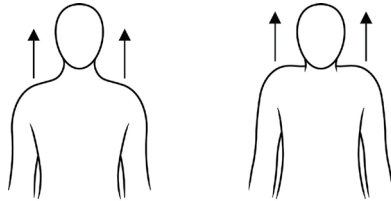
Please follow the guidelines on the next page on when to progress your exercises.

If you are unsure when you should progress your exercises then contact the Physiotherapy Department (contact details on page 14).

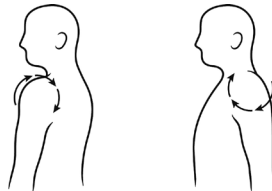
Set A exercises

Start these exercises from the first day after your operation.
They should be performed **three times a day**, sitting on a chair.
Repeat each exercise 5 times per session.

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



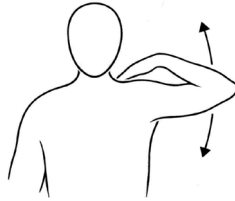
2. Sitting upright with your arms relaxed by your side, slowly rotate your shoulders up, back and down in a continuous motion.



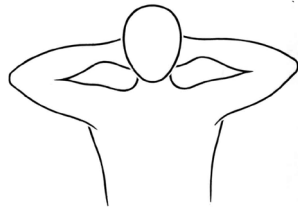
3. Place your hand on your shoulder (same side). Raise your elbow forwards to shoulder height and then down.



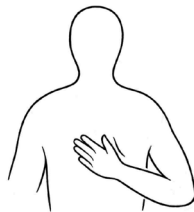
4. Place your hand on your shoulder (same side). Raise your elbow up to shoulder height and then down back to your side.



5. Clasp your hands behind your neck. Keeping your head up, push your elbows out to the side and then back to the middle. If you have had surgery on both sides, do one arm at a time.



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



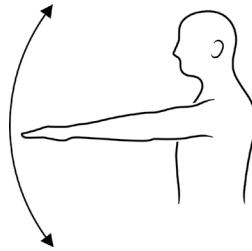
Set B exercises

Continue with Set A exercises and start Set B one week after your operation.

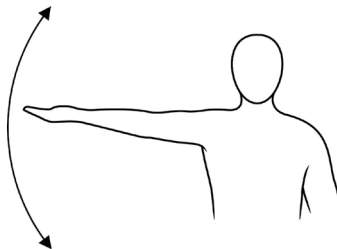
These should be performed **three times a day**, sitting or standing up. You may experience some discomfort with your exercises but they should not be painful.

Repeat each exercise 5 times per session.

1. Place your arm by your side with your elbow straight. Raise your arm forwards and up above your head. Then slowly bring it back down, keeping your elbow as straight as possible.



2. Place your arm by your side with your elbow straight. Raise your arm out to the side away from your body, turning the palm of your hand upwards, and continue up towards your head. Then slowly bring your arm back down again.



Set C exercises / stretches

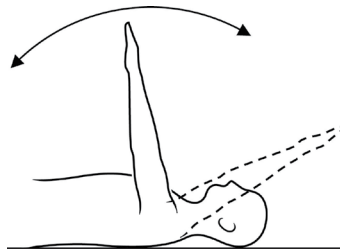
10–14 days after your operation start Set C exercises / stretches.

You may continue with Set A exercises as a warm up but it is no longer necessary to continue with Set B. Set C should be performed **at least twice a day**, lying flat on the bed or floor.

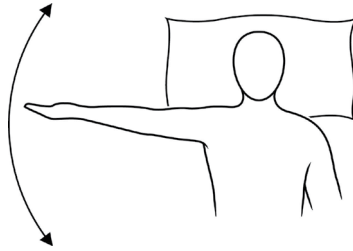
Repeat each exercise 5 times per session.

These exercises are designed to stretch the soft tissues so you should experience a stretching sensation. This should gradually ease as your movement improves. If you are finding the sensation very uncomfortable or painful, please contact the physiotherapy department.

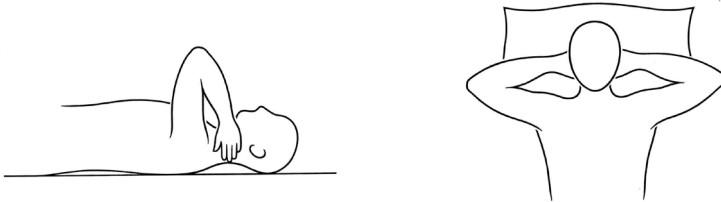
1. Starting with your arm by your side and your elbow straight, raise your arm forwards and up above your head. Give a gentle push with your other arm to gain extra movement. Hold it in this position for a **count of 10** and then slowly bring your arm back down to your side.



2. Starting with your arm by your side and your elbow straight, raise your arm out to the side away from your body and continue up towards your head. (Do not allow your arm to creep forward). Keep your arm in this position for a **count of 10** and then slowly bring it back down to your side.



3. Clasp your hands behind your neck, with your elbows pointing towards the ceiling (ensure your head remains on the pillow). Stretch your elbows out to the side, trying to touch the bed or floor with them. Keep them in this position for a **count of 10** and then slowly bring them back in so that they are pointing at the ceiling again.



Additional exercise and advice following partial breast reconstruction (volume replacement)

As this type of surgery requires a larger incision on the chest wall, you may experience additional tightness. It is important to continue your stretching exercises but please contact the Physiotherapy Department if you require further advice.

Scar management

As soon as your wound is healed, massaging the skin with a simple moisturiser can improve the appearance of the scar and keep the area supple. We recommend massaging in a circular motion over the scar for 2–5 minutes, twice a day.

Regaining and maintaining shoulder movement

Continuing exercises

If you go on to have radiotherapy to your breast and/or axilla, continue Set C exercises/stretchers indefinitely following the end of your treatment. Radiotherapy can cause a subtle tightening effect across the chest wall which may result in shoulder pain and stiffness at a later date.

If you are not having radiotherapy, continue your exercises until you feel your arm is back to normal.

Radiotherapy class

An information session for patients having radiotherapy to their breast is held every 3–4 weeks. This provides information on exercise, lymphoedema and skin care. At your first radiotherapy appointment, ask your radiographer for the next available class.

Posture

After your operation, it is easy to adopt poor posture due to a combination of discomfort and apprehension when moving around. However, it is really important to prevent this from becoming a habit as good posture can help prevent muscular pain and back problems.

Try to:

- Sit upright
- Relax your shoulders downwards and backwards to help 'open up' your chest area and elongate your neck

Try to avoid:

- Hunching or rounding your shoulders
- Tensing your neck muscles
- Holding your arm protectively across your body

Advice on using your arm after breast surgery

The following guidelines will help you to regain the full use of your arm as quickly as possible after your breast surgery.

Daily activities and lifting

Try to use your affected arm for light activities as soon as you feel comfortable to do so. It is advisable to use your unaffected arm for heavier and more repetitive tasks for the first 4–6 weeks.

It is safe to lift light objects, such as a kettle, two pint saucepan or light bag with your affected arm. However, use your unaffected arm for heavier items.

In the first few weeks after surgery it is particularly important to limit the amount of time you spend with your arm held in a static position, such as computer work. This is to try to minimise cording symptoms. If your work is mostly computer based, try to build up your working hours gradually and take frequent breaks. Please see **General points** on page 10 for a description of cording.

After four to six weeks your operation scar should be well healed, and you can gradually increase the amount you are doing with your affected arm. You may feel an aching around your shoulder after certain activities, but this should subside as the muscles become stronger.

It is important to gradually return to your normal activities, however, remain cautious with any lifting or activity that places excessive strain on your affected arm, as this may increase your risk of developing lymphoedema (see The Royal Marsden factsheet *Reducing the risk of lymphoedema to your arm*).

Driving

It is sensible not to drive until after your first outpatient clinic appointment following your operation. However, do not start driving until you feel confident that you are safe and able to react in an emergency. Go on short trips to start with and gradually increase the distance as you feel able.

Sport and leisure

If you have good shoulder movement and your operation scar has healed (usually 4–6 weeks after your operation), you may begin swimming. If you are having radiotherapy by this stage you will need to check with your radiographer that this is possible. Most other leisure activities can be restarted within two months. Please contact your physiotherapist if you need further advice about your particular sport or hobby.

Returning to work

When you return to work will depend on what your job involves. Your doctor or physiotherapist can discuss your work with you and give more specific advice.

General points

The following advice is more relevant to patients who have had lymph nodes removed from under their arm.

1. Following breast surgery you may experience changes in sensation over your breast and inner arm, for example numbness, tingling, or extra-sensitivity to touch. These sensations are quite normal and often subside a few months after surgery. Sometimes gentle stroking or tapping of your inner arm may ease the discomfort. However, you may be left with some residual numbness.
2. You may notice some soft swelling in your armpit or around your wound (called a seroma) a few days after your operation or removal of your drains. This is caused by a collection of fluid. If this happens, reduce your exercises to Set A only, and contact your hospital doctor or GP for further advice. You may find that this takes several weeks to settle, so it is important to progress your exercises gradually, as you feel more comfortable, in order to prevent your shoulder becoming stiff.
3. After your operation, tight bands or cords may develop in your armpit, sometimes stretching down your arm. You may experience a sharp pulling sensation, or pain, when you try to stretch your arm or do your exercises. Whilst it may seem difficult, exercise will help to stretch and relieve these cords, allowing you to move your arm freely again. However, as previously mentioned, holding your arm in a static position for long periods may worsen the cording effects and discomfort. In most cases, cording will gradually improve but if you are experiencing severe pain and/or restriction of your movement, please contact your physiotherapist for advice or review.

General physical activity

Studies have shown that physical activity tends to decrease significantly for many people after cancer diagnosis and treatment. This tends to lead to an increase in symptoms such as fatigue as your body loses fitness.

Overall, this can affect your quality of life by impacting on the things that you enjoy doing. Exercise and physical activity can be one way to help overcome this.

There is also evidence that regular physical activity may help you to lower the risk of recurrence of some forms of breast cancer.

Being physically active can help lift your mood, giving you a focus to help yourself improve your confidence.

Exercise can help reduce the risk of other problems such as osteoporosis, heart disease, weight issues and joint problems which are known side effects of some cancer treatments.

Regular exercise and physical activity can also help you to regain and maintain your strength and stamina after treatment.

How much should I do?

Being physically active means moving your body and using energy at an intensity that makes you warm and slightly out of breath (such as brisk walking). The current recommendation is that we should all do moderate exercise or activity five times a week for 30 minutes each time. During and immediately after your treatment you may feel this is too much for you. However, you can still benefit if you break the 30 minutes into three lots of ten minute sessions. You will have to wait a few weeks after surgery before starting more vigorous exercise, particularly if it involves your affected arm.

Is it safe for me to exercise?

If you are at all unsure whether you should be exercising during any of your treatments, such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy, ask your doctor at the hospital. As a general rule, you should avoid more vigorous exercise for 24 hours following chemotherapy.

Do not exercise until you have seen a member of the medical team or if you have any of the following:

- Heart condition or an irregular pulse

- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Altered blood cell counts
- Dizziness or blurred vision
- Feeling sick
- Recent or 'new' pain.

Persistent pain must not be ignored; if there is injury, you will have to stop exercising and take medical advice.

It is important to remember to drink plenty of fluids before and after exercising. A healthy diet will help you gain the maximum benefit from exercise and is an important aspect of your recovery. If you are planning to increase your activity levels, you should also increase your energy and protein intake to maintain your weight.

If you have any concerns about your diet, extra information can be found in The Royal Marsden booklet *Diet and breast cancer*.

Setting achievable goals

- It is important to set a goal or target as a way to motivate yourself to increase and maintain your physical activity. For instance, it may be something as simple as increasing the time you walk by an extra five minutes, or getting off the bus a couple of stops earlier to walk back home.
- Setting short, realistic goals will help you keep going.
- Think about what might help you keep active, for example, you may be more motivated if you arrange to walk with friends or family or play golf with a colleague. Using a step counter (pedometer) may help you check your progress when walking, or think about the distance you cover.
- Keeping a diary of your activity is a great way to challenge and reward yourself for your progress.

Where can I get more information about physical activity and exercise?

There are many organisations that can provide you with more information on exercise and physical activity. These include:

Department of Health initiative – www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/

This website provides examples of activities and videos to help you become more active.

Many local councils provide schemes related to exercise, often together with GPs and primary care services. To find out more about what is available in your area, please ask your GP or look at local resources such as your library, council information service and local pharmacies.

Contact details

If you have any questions about the exercises, or if you have any problems with stiffness or pain in your shoulder or arm, please contact:

Breast care physiotherapist

Chelsea 020 7808 2821 (answer phone)

Sutton 020 8661 3098 (answer phone)

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899

You can ring the hotline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Call us straight away if you are feeling unwell or are worried about the side effects of cancer treatments.

This service provides specialist advice and support to all Royal Marsden patients, as well as to their carers, and both hospital and community-based doctors and nurses caring for Royal Marsden patients.

Notes and questions

Notes and questions

References

This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

The Royal Marsden Help Centre

Telephone: Chelsea 020 7811 8438 / 020 7808 2083

Sutton 020 8661 3759 / 3951

Email: patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk

No conflicts of interest were declared in the production of this booklet.

Should you require information in an alternative format, please contact The Royal Marsden Help Centre.

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royalmarsden.org

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