

Advice following axillary dissection

After you have had an operation on your axilla (armpit), you may feel reluctant to move your arm. It is important to do these exercises so that you can regain full use of it as soon as possible.

The exercises are performed in three stages:

- Set A – from the first day after your operation
- Set B – after one week following your operation as long as your drain is out and any swelling (seroma) is settling
- Set C – one week after starting set B (at least two weeks post-surgery).

Continuing exercises

If you go on to have radiotherapy, continue Set C stretches indefinitely following the end of your treatment. This is to reduce any tissue tightness, which can cause shoulder problems, at a later date. If you are not having radiotherapy, continue your exercises until you feel your arm is back to normal.

Advice on using your arm after axillary dissection

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

Exercise

Your physiotherapist has shown you exercises to do regularly at home. These will help you to regain the movement of your shoulder.

Lifting and housework

For the first four to six weeks after your operation, only lift light objects with your affected arm, for example, a light shopping bag or a kettle. Use your other arm to lift heavier items, for example, the vacuum cleaner.

It is advisable to use your **unaffected** arm for heavy or repetitive tasks such as window cleaning, ironing or vacuum cleaning. However, you can use your affected arm for light activities, such as washing up, dusting or cooking as soon as you feel comfortable to do so.

Limit the amount of time spent on activities such as knitting, writing, computer work and piano playing in the first two to four weeks following surgery. All these activities require static muscle contraction, which may cause discomfort.



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.

While it is important to gradually return to your normal activities, you should avoid sustained strenuous activity as this may increase your risk of lymphoedema. Further information on reducing the risk of lymphoedema can be found in The Royal Marsden factsheet *Reducing the risk of lymphoedema to your arm*.

Driving

You should not 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. When you do start, initially go on short trips and gradually increase the distance as you feel able. It is wise to check your insurance policy following any surgery.

Sport and leisure

If you have good shoulder movement and your operation scar has healed (usually four to six weeks after your operation), you may begin swimming. If you are having radiotherapy by this stage you may 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 require 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

Following axillary surgery, you may experience changes in sensation over your inner arm (for example numbness, tingling or extra-sensitivity to touch). These sensations are quite common and often subside a few months after your surgery. Sometimes gentle stroking or tapping of your inner arm may ease the discomfort. However, you may be left with some residual numbness.

You may notice some soft swelling in your armpit or around your wound a few days after the drainage tubes have been removed. This is caused by a collection of fluid. If this swelling increases, causes pain or causes movement to become restricted, then you should contact The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline or your GP.

You should also contact them if you notice signs of infection which may include increasing pain, redness, raised skin temperature, swelling, oozing, fever (temperature higher than 38°C) and feeling generally unwell. If any swelling does not reduce after six to eight weeks, please contact your hospital doctor or the lymphoedema team for advice.

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. Exercise will help to stretch and relieve these cords, allowing you to move your arm freely again. Although they will gradually get better, it is important to contact your physiotherapist for their advice.



Contact details

If you have any queries or concerns, please contact the Physiotherapy team:

Chelsea 020 7808 2821 (answer phone)

Sutton 020 8661 3098 (answer phone)

Outside of normal working hours, please contact:

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline: 020 8915 6899

(Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

Sources of information and support

Macmillan Cancer Support

Macmillan provides free information and emotional support for people living with cancer and can signpost to local cancer support groups and organisations near you.

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan Support Line: 0808 808 00 00 (7 days a week, 8am–8pm)

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP)

CSP provides information on NHS and private physiotherapists with a special interest in cancer care and in women's health. They also produce public information leaflets.

Website: www.csp.org.uk

