

Arm exercises following your breast surgery

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

After your operation – General Advice

Following your breast surgery you may experience changes in sensation over your breast and inner arm such as numbness, tingling or increased sensitivity to light touch. These changes are quite normal and often fade after a few months. You may have some numbness under your arm that does not go away but you will soon stop noticing it.

You may notice some soft swelling in your armpit and stiffness in your shoulder when the drainage tubes have been removed from your operation wound. This happens because of a collection of fluid known as a seroma. If this happens continue with the set of exercises and contact the breast care ward for advice.

Tight bands or cords of tissue may appear in your armpit after your operation and sometimes stretch down your arm. You may experience a sharp pulling sensation or pain, when you try to stretch your arm. Exercises will help to stretch these cords and relieve the discomfort, allowing you to move your arm freely again.

Arm care after surgery

A small number of people develop a swelling in the breast area or in the arm or hand on the operated side. This is known as lymphoedema and may develop weeks, months or years after the operation. The swelling may cause your rings and watches to feel tight and leave marks on the skin. If this happens, contact your breast care nurse.

Advice for when you go home

- Continue your exercises and use your arm as normally as possible. You should continue with your exercises every day until you can use your arm as well as you could before the operation. If you have also had radiotherapy you need to keep doing the exercises for two years after treatment as your shoulder can become stiff and tight.
- General light household activities like dusting, washing up and preparing light meals are all good exercises for your arm.
- Use your unaffected arm for heavy and repetitive tasks such as vacuum cleaning or ironing for the first 4 – 6 weeks after your surgery.
- Avoid carrying heavy objects – such as shopping on the arm of the operated side.
- Keep the skin and fingernails on the side of the swelling in good condition and well moisturised
- Don't drive until 14 days after your operation. Start by going on short trips and gradually increase the distance, as you feel confident.

After 6 weeks, the operation scar will be well healed and you can gradually use your arm more. You may feel an aching around the shoulder after certain activities, but this should become less, as the muscles grow stronger.

Sport and leisure

If the operation scar is well healed after 6 weeks, you can begin swimming. Most other leisure activities can be started after 2 months of your operation.

Returning to work

Your doctor will advise you on when you may return to work. The date will depend on the type of work you do.

Set A Exercises

The following exercises should be started after surgery and continued for one week.

- Repeat exercises four times a day
- Do each exercise 3 times at first and build up to 5 times each.
- Do the exercises as a slow stretch.
- Each separate exercise should take to the count of 5 to complete.



Set A continued

3a



3b



4a



4b



5a



5b



Set B Exercises

After you have been at home for one week and as long as your wound is healing you can progress your exercises.

- Do each exercise 3 times at first and build up to 5 times each
- Do the exercise as a slow stretch.
- Each separate exercise should take to the count of 5 to complete
- When full movement returns repeat the exercises once a day for one year after surgery.

1a



1b



2a



2a



Set B continued

3a



3b



4a



4b

