

Exercise after breast cancer surgery



Finding out about breast cancer and undergoing treatment can be a challenging experience for most people affected by breast cancer. It is important to begin gentle exercise as soon as possible after surgery to aid recovery and movement. This fact sheet provides instructions and explanation about the exercises you will be encouraged to begin soon after your surgery.

Your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist will advise you of the appropriate time to begin these exercises after surgery. Often the sooner you begin to move your arm with gentle exercise, the better your future arm movement and physical recovery will be. This fact sheet provides practical information about post operative exercises that can aid your recovery.

If you have lymph glands removed from under your arm you will probably feel sore and stiff in the arm and shoulder. It is also likely that you will feel numbness under the arm because the nerves have been affected by the operation.

Provided you are not receiving radiation therapy near your arm, it is safe to shave under your arm and use deodorant once your skin has healed.

Lymphoedema and arm care

Lymph (lymphatic fluid) flows all through our bodies and helps to fight infection. LYMPHOEDEMA is the collection of lymphatic fluid in the tissues under the skin. This can occur when the lymph cannot flow as efficiently because some lymph glands have been removed in surgery or damaged by radiation therapy. This means a person who has received these treatments has an increased risk of developing lymphoedema. Early signs of lymphoedema include; mild intermittent swelling, tightness or aching and/or heaviness in the arm, hand or chest wall.

Steps to reduce your risk of overloading the lymphatic system include:

- Avoid trauma: protect your arm by wearing sleeves.
- Avoid letting your arm become over-exposed to the sun.
- Avoid cuts, burns and insect bites.
- Use skin cream to keep skin moist on affected arm(s).
- Seek immediate medical advice if any areas or cuts become hot, red and swollen.
- Avoid carrying anything heavy with the affected arm for a prolonged time.
- Avoid blood being taken, blood pressure being checked, injections and needles being inserted in the affected arm.
- Avoid washing-up in hot water without gloves, and keep cool in hot weather.
- Wear loose clothing and loose jewellery to avoid constriction and swelling.
- Eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly to help maintain body weight within reasonable limits.

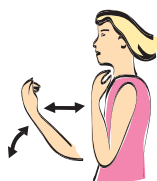
The exercises over the page are designed to gradually improve the movement of your arm and shoulder. As with any exercise program, check with your doctor or physiotherapist if these exercises are the best for you. Doing the exercises in the suggested sequence uses the muscle pump to move fluid out of the arm.

Level one exercises

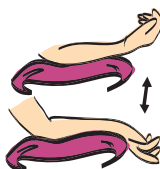
These exercises can be done while lying on a bed or sitting in a chair. When you are not doing exercises you may find it comfortable to rest your arm on a pillow. These exercises should be done slowly and rhythmically.

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A ELBOW: Bend your elbow and touch your shoulder with your hand. Then straighten your elbow completely.



B WRIST: Support your elbow on a pillow. Keep your hand relaxed and your arm by your side then bend your wrist back and forth.



C Make a fist and squeeze slowly and gently, open fingers out and relax.



Level two exercises

(Do ten repetitions of exercises D–G four times a day.)

You may add level two exercises to your program when your doctor or physiotherapist says you are able to move your shoulder. These exercises aim to restore the movement in your shoulder joint. They should be done gently within your own comfort level. If you are experiencing numbness over the chest, arm and armpit area, continue these exercises gently. If you experience severe pain do not persist with the exercises – stop and do them gently later on during the day. You should experience a gradual increase in shoulder movement. To improve your arm movements, use your arm for combing your hair, getting dressed, putting on make-up and reaching for light objects.

D Clasp your hands together in front of your chest, keeping your elbows in. Using your strong arm to assist, stretch both arms until your elbows are straight out in front at shoulder height then return to your chest.



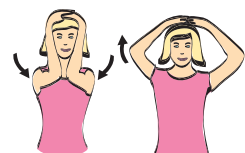
E Clasp your hands together in front of your chest, keeping your elbows in. Using your strong arm to assist, lift your arms slowly until your elbows are beside your head, then straighten your elbows as high as you are able. Return to your chest. The movement should be continuous and aim to reach your hands above your head within your comfort level.



F With your head upright and hands clasped behind your neck, stretch your elbows backward. Hold for five to ten seconds to stretch the muscles on your chest wall. These exercises can be continued until you can use your arm normally with full movement. When performing these exercises try not to tilt your upper body.

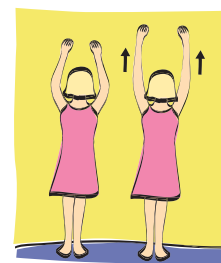


G Clasp hands in front of your chest, keeping your elbows in. Using your strong arm to assist, stretch up slowly and rest your clasped hands on your head. Slowly and gently bring your elbows together and then stretch your elbows backwards. At first you may find this exercise easier if you lie down. Hold for five to ten seconds.



These exercises may help you to monitor your return to full shoulder and arm movement:

Stand facing the wall as close as possible to it. Rest both hands on the wall. Moving both hands together, stretch your arms upward by walking your fingers up the wall. Try to achieve a full stretch with your arms close to your head. Slowly walk your fingers back down to the wall and relax. Mark the wall so you can see your progress.



Progress may be slower in the first few weeks. Arm movement and function should have returned to about 75 per cent, one month after the operation. If you experience difficulties with your arm you may benefit from additional exercises or treatment from a physiotherapist. You may also like to discuss this with your doctor.

Once you have achieved your normal arm movement again, continue with the exercises once a day until all your treatment has been finished.

For further information and support for you and your family visit www.cancerqld.org.au or call the Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20.

Disclaimer: The information enclosed is provided for educational purposes or for personal use only. Cancer Council Queensland (CCQ) strongly advises this information should not be used as a substitute for seeking medical or health care advice. We strongly recommend that you seek advice from your doctor or treating health care team before making any decision about your health care treatment. Please note that the information enclosed reflects the opinion of the author/s at the time of writing. Every effort has been made by CCQ to ensure its accuracy, however CCQ and its advisors do not accept any liability in relation to this information. This publication is current as at November, 2011.