

Physiotherapy advice after breast reconstruction with implant / expander

Physiotherapy

Information for patients and carers

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Caring for you

What to do after your surgery

You have had surgery to reconstruct your breast using an implant or expander.

It is normal to have some discomfort in your breast and armpit after surgery. Listen to your body and stay within your own comfort levels. We want you to be able to move your arm comfortably.

It is important not to use your arm too much until the wounds heal. However, it is also important to keep your shoulder moving so that it does not become stiff.

Performing exercises will help your arm to regain the range of arm movement it had prior to your surgery. However, you must avoid overstretching the wound or overusing your chest muscles until the wounds have healed.

During the first 3 weeks, you must avoid:

- stretching your arm higher than shoulder height (90 degrees) forwards or sideways
- lifting or carrying anything heavy
- pushing or pulling anything heavy such as a door
- anything which makes the arm feel very tight or painfully stretched

If you are unsure, don't do it. Wait until someone is around to help you.

Lifting

Avoid heavy lifting for 6 to 8 weeks after surgery.

This includes:

- heavy shopping bags
- dishes
- washing baskets

If you have young children, avoid lifting them during this time.

When you start lifting again, use both hands to reduce the strain and discomfort on your operated side.

Work

When you can return to work depends on:

- your job
- the type of surgery you had
- any follow up treatment which you may need

You will need to consider the activities which you normally do.

If your job is mainly desk-based, you may be able to return after 6 to 8 weeks.

If you have a more active job, it may take 3 to 6 months before you feel able to return.

You may need to:

- talk to your manager about which tasks you can do safely at first
- consider returning to work part time at first

Driving

You should wait around 3 to 4 weeks before driving again. This is to allow your arms to regain their strength.

Before you go back to driving, make sure that you can:

- move both your arms fully
- look over both shoulders
- change gear comfortably with a seatbelt on
- safely perform an emergency stop

A seatbelt cushion or protector may help if the seatbelt feels uncomfortable. They can be bought from a car accessories shop.

You should check with your insurance company, as some have a time limit for driving after surgery. If you have not told them, your insurance may not be valid.

Sport

Some sports or exercise groups can be restarted after 6 to 8 weeks.

If your chosen sport involves contact or strenuous arm movements (such as golf, swimming, racket sports such as tennis), wait until at least 12 weeks.

For all sporting activities, aim to start gently and pace yourself.

Avoid stretches and arm / upper body strengthening exercises, including resistance work or weights, for at least 3 months after an implant or expander is inserted.

Always tell your instructor about your surgery before starting or continuing any exercise class or activity. They can advise on the best way to safely take part.

Basic exercises – first 4 weeks

Why exercise?

After surgery, it is important to exercise the arm on the same side as your operation.

It helps to:

- prevent shoulder stiffness
- regain normal arm movement
- prevent swelling

If you have any problems with delayed wound healing or signs of infection, ask your physiotherapist or specialist nurse for advice whether you should continue, pause or restart exercise.

Start basic exercises the day after surgery.

Aim to do them 3 times a day, within your comfort level, ideally about 30 minutes after taking pain relief.

Breathing exercises

Aim to do 3 repetitions of each.

1. Deep breathing

Take a deep breath in through your nose filling your lungs as full as possible, hold, and gently breathe out.

2. Diaphragmatic breathing

Rest a hand on your stomach just under your rib cage. As you breathe in, your stomach should rise and as you breathe out should fall.

3. Huffing / coughing

Take a short, forced breath out (huff) to help clear phlegm in your chest.

Circulatory exercises

Gentle leg exercises are important to help your circulation whilst you are not moving around as much. Aim to do 5 repetitions of each.

1. wiggle your toes
2. pull your feet up and push them away
3. gently bend your knees up and down one at a time and relax
4. tighten your thigh muscles by pushing your knee down onto the bed, hold for 5 seconds and relax.
5. clench your bottom muscles, hold for 5 seconds and relax

Arm exercises

Aim to do up to 10 repetitions of each.

1. Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears, then relax.
2. Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears, then roll them back and down, squeezing your shoulder blades together. Take deep breaths while doing this.
3. Place your hands on your shoulders and slowly circle your elbows, aiming to lift to shoulder height



4. Alternatively, stand holding onto a chair, and let your affected arm hang by your side. Swing the arm gently in small circles.



Progressing your home exercises – from 4 weeks post-operation

If the wounds are healing well, you can add these exercises after 4 weeks.

If you are unsure, check with your physiotherapist.

Shoulder exercises

1. Lie on your back with elbows bent or straight. Clasp your hands together and stretch up above your head, use your unaffected arm to help.



2. Once you can reach your head, place your hands behind your head and slowly move your elbows back towards the pillow. This is especially important if you are having radiotherapy.



3. Wall climbing

Stand close to and facing a wall. Start with your hands at shoulder level and gradually walk your hands up the wall as high as you can. Then gently lean towards the wall using your body weight to increase the stretch.



4. Variation

Stand close to the wall but this time sideways, with the operated side closest to the wall. Gradually walk your hand up the wall as far as you can. Then gently and gradually lean in towards the wall to increase the stretch.



When to contact your physiotherapist

Please contact us if you notice:

- difficulty regaining full movement
- heaviness or swelling in your arm on the operated side
- loss of movement you had regained in your arm
- a tight 'band' of tissue forming the length or a portion of the length of your arm when it is straight
- scar tissue that feels tight or becomes stuck (does not move freely with its surrounding skin as you move)

Contacts

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Useful websites

- North Cheshire and Mersey NHS Foundation Trust
www.northcheshireandmersey.nhs.uk/
- Cheshire and Merseyside Cancer Alliance
www.cmcanceralliance.nhs.uk/
- Breast Cancer Now Charity
www.breastcancer.org.uk/