

Physiotherapy advice after breast surgery (lumpectomy / breast conserving surgery or simple mastectomy without reconstruction)

Physiotherapy

Information for patients and carers

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Caring for you

Using your arm after surgery

After breast surgery, it is important to use the arm on the same side as your operation and to do your exercises.

This helps you:

- prevent shoulder stiffness
- regain normal movement in your arm
- prevent swelling.

Use your arm for light activities. Take extra care for least 4 weeks after your surgery.

Returning to work

When you can return to work depends on:

- the type of job you do
- whether you need any follow-up treatment such as radiotherapy or chemotherapy after your surgery.

Speak with your breast care nurse and your employer to agree a safe return date. If you need to see a physiotherapist after your surgery, they can also advise you.

Activities at home

Most people can return to their usual activities within 2 to 6 weeks. This varies from person to person.

When using your phone or tablet:

- sit in a supported position
- avoid slouching
- try to change position and move around every 30 minutes

You can start light tasks soon after you return home, such as dusting and washing up.

For heavier tasks, wait 2 to 4 weeks. You should start small and build up slowly.

This includes

- ironing
- vacuuming
- gardening
- pegging out washing

Avoid over-reaching with the arm on the side of your operation, for example, reaching into high cupboards.

Lifting

Avoid lifting anything heavier than a kettle full of water for 4 weeks after your surgery. This includes:

- heavy shopping bags
- heavy dishes
- pans

If you care for young children, you will need to change the way you lift and carry them, including if they are in a car seat. If you do have to lift them, use the other arm.

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

Driving

Wait at least 2 weeks before driving again. This is to allow your arms to regain their strength and movement.

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

Before driving again, check with your insurance company, as some have a time limit for driving after surgery. If you do not tell them, your insurance may not be valid.

Exercise and sport

There is evidence that being active after surgery can help your long-term recovery.

Exercise and being active can:

- improve your mood and confidence
- help you to regain and maintain your strength and fitness
- reduce tiredness

Even just going for regular walks can help you feel better.

Most sports and classes can restart after 4 weeks. If your sport is a contact sport or involves strenuous arm movements (such as weights in the gym, golf, swimming, racket sports such as tennis), then wait about 6 weeks and start back gradually.

Rest

It is normal to feel tired after your surgery. Remember that you have had an operation and a general anaesthetic.

It is also a worrying time, so it is understandable that you can feel worn out.

Try to rest your mind and body each day.

Activities such as yoga, mindfulness and relaxation may help.

Shoulder and arm exercises

Your recommended exercises are in the '**Breast Cancer Now**' leaflet.

The leaflet includes:

- a warm-up section
- exercises for the first week after surgery (basic)
- exercises to start 7 days after surgery (advanced)

We recommend that you do 5 repetitions of each exercise, 3 times each day. You should do the warm-up exercises each time.

You should continue with the basic exercises while you still have drains and stitches, even if that is longer than 7 days.

After they have been removed or have dissolved (around 7 to 10 days after surgery), you can move on to the advanced exercises.

Keep doing the exercises for 6 weeks, or until your radiotherapy treatment starts.

If you do need radiotherapy, you will be given advice on exercises and skin care at your first appointment.

Risk of potential lymphoedema

If you had lymph nodes removed from your armpit, there is a risk of your arm swelling. This is called lymphoedema. This is caused by a build-up of lymph fluid.

Signs include:

- swelling
- a heavy feeling
- jewellery feeling tighter

Some swelling in the first few days after surgery is normal. It is not always a sign that lymphoedema is developing.

Exercise will not increase your risk of lymphoedema or make it worse. Exercise may help your general wellbeing.

Looking after your arm

- Keep doing your arm exercises.
- As well as shoulder exercises, you should bend and straighten your elbow, wrist and hand regularly
- Wear gloves when gardening or using harsh chemicals.
- Clean and treat any cuts by washing and using antiseptic.
- Contact your GP if a cut shows signs of infection (looks red, feels hot or there is a discharge).
- Take care when cutting your nails.
- Take care when shaving under your arm, a lady shaver is a safer option.
- Avoid sunburn.
- Avoid blood pressure checks or blood tests on your affected arm.
- Avoid injections or drips on your affected arm where possible.
- Keep your skin clean and use moisturiser.

For more detailed information, see the 'lymphoedema risk reduction' leaflet included in your pre-operative information package.

Breast Cancer Now also has an information leaflet called 'Reducing the risk of lymphoedema' available on their website – www.breastcancernow.org

When to get advice

Contact your breast care nurse or physiotherapist if you notice:

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

Contacts and further information

- Warrington Hospital, Lovely Lane, Warrington, Cheshire, WA5 1QG
Physiotherapy
01925 662500
- Halton Hospital, Hospital Way, Runcorn, Cheshire, WA7 2DA
Rehabilitation Unit

01928 753236

Useful websites

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