

## Exercises After Breast Cancer Surgery

*This information was developed with assistance from the Oncology Section of the American Physical Therapy Association.*

Many women with breast cancer require some form of surgery, in addition to other kinds of treatment. You may have had a:

- Breast biopsy
- Lymph node biopsy or removal
- Breast conservation surgery (lumpectomy)
- Mastectomy
- Breast reconstruction

Any of these can affect how well you can move your shoulder and arm, take a deep breath, or do your daily activities, like dressing, bathing, and combing your hair. Pain and stiffness can cause weakness and limit movement of your arm and shoulder.

### ***Exercises can help restore movement.***

No matter what type of surgery you have, it's important to do exercises afterward to get the arm and shoulder moving again. Exercises help to decrease side effects of your surgery and help you get back to your usual activities.

If you've had radiation therapy after surgery, exercises are even more important to help keep your arm and shoulder flexible. Radiation may affect your arm and shoulder long after treatment is finished. Because of this, it's important to develop a regular habit of doing exercises to maintain arm and shoulder mobility after radiation treatments for breast cancer.

It's very important to talk with your doctor before starting any exercises so that you can decide on a program that's right for you. Your doctor might suggest you see a physical therapist (PT) or occupational therapist (OT) who is specially trained to work with oncology patients and can design an individualized exercise program

just for you. You might need this kind of help if you do not have full use of your arm within 3 to 4 weeks of surgery.

*Note: depending on other health factors, it is sometimes beneficial to see a PT or OT prior to your surgery. This allows you to be educated about the role of exercise in your recovery and learn basic postural and shoulder stabilization exercises that are important to practice prior to your surgery.*

**\*1-2 weeks after surgery (refer to *Early Postoperative Exercise Handout*)**

With your physician's approval, some exercises can be started in the first week or two after your surgery. These exercises can be done while your post-surgical drains are still in place. *Exercises to help make your arm stronger are added later.*

The tips listed below should be done for the first 3 to 7 days after surgery:

- Use your affected arm (on the side where your surgery was) as you normally would when you comb your hair, bathe, get dressed, and eat. You may be told by your doctor to avoid any motion of the affected arm over shoulder height (90 degrees).
- Lie down and position your affected arm above the level of your heart for 30-45 minutes. Do this 2-3 times per day. Put your arm on pillows so that your hand is higher than your wrist and your elbow is a little higher than your shoulder. This will help decrease the swelling that may happen after surgery.
- Do not sleep on your affected arm or lie on that side.

**\*Once cleared by doctor for overhead motion (refer to *Progressed Postoperative Exercise Handout*)**

Once your drains have been removed, your doctor will let you know if it is ok to progress to overhead exercises to restore full motion of your arm. Important points to remember as you continue your recovery after breast surgery:

- You will feel some tightness in your chest and armpit after surgery. This is normal, and the tightness will decrease as you do your exercises.
- Many women have burning, tingling, numbness, or soreness on the back of the arm and/or on the chest wall. This is because the surgery can irritate some of your nerves. These feelings might increase a few weeks after surgery. But keep doing your exercises unless you notice unusual swelling or tenderness. (If this happens, let your doctor know about it right away.)

Sometimes rubbing or stroking the area with your hand or a soft cloth can help make the area less sensitive.

- It may be helpful to do the exercises after a warm shower when muscles are warm and relaxed.
- Wear comfortable, loose clothing when doing the exercises.
- It's normal to feel some pulling as you stretch the skin and muscles that have been shortened because of the surgery. Do not bounce or make any jerky movements when doing any of the exercises. You should not feel pain as you do them, only gentle stretching.
- Attempt to do the exercises twice a day until you get back your normal flexibility.
- Be sure to take deep breaths, in and out, as you do each exercise.

### ***Things to keep in mind after breast surgery***

Start exercising slowly and increase as you are able. Stop exercising and talk to your doctor right away if you:

- Get weaker, start losing your balance, or start falling
- Have pain that gets worse
- Have new heaviness, aching, tightness, or other strange sensations in your arm
- Have unusual swelling or swelling gets worse
- Have headaches, dizziness, blurred vision, new numbness, or tingling in your arms or chest

It's important to exercise to keep your muscles working as well as possible, but it's also important to be safe. Talk with your doctor about the right kind of exercises for your condition, and then set goals for increasing your level of physical activity.

### ***Other kinds of exercise***

Exercise to help improve aerobic (heart-lung) capacity is also important for women who have had breast cancer. There's evidence that fitness and weight loss may even help lower the risk that some types of cancer will come back after treatment. Ask your doctor or physical therapist about fitness exercises during and after breast cancer treatment.

Other exercises are designed to help reduce your risk of [lymphedema](#), or swelling in the arm on the side where you had surgery. The exercises shown here are

mainly designed to help regain range of motion of the arm and shoulder. Ask your doctor or physical therapist about your lymphedema risk and about how to reduce that risk.

Strengthening exercises are now recommended as part of regular exercise programs to improve health. These are not started until 4 to 6 weeks after surgery, and must be tailored to your general health, medical condition, and fitness. Strength building starts by using small hand weights and is increased slowly over time. Again, this is best addressed with your doctor or physical therapist. It's probably best to start a strengthening program in a supervised setting with a physical therapist who specializes in cancer care to be sure you're doing the exercises properly.

"Exercises After Breast Cancer Surgery." *Cancer A to Z*. American Cancer Society, Inc, 13 Sept. 2017. Web. 22 May 2018.