Exercises after Breast Surgery

A guide for women
This guide is for women who have had surgery for breast cancer. Breast cancer is mainly a disease in women, but each year a small number of men are also diagnosed with the disease. We often refer to women in the text, but men who have had surgery for breast cancer may find the information in this booklet helpful.

The information in this booklet is general and should not replace discussions with your healthcare team.
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Introduction

Exercise is an important part of your treatment and recovery after surgery for breast cancer. It can help you:

- begin your daily activities again (such as bathing and dressing)
- maintain movement in your arm and shoulder
- improve muscle tone
- decrease joint stiffness
- reduce pain in the neck and back area
- improve your overall well-being

Everyone is different and heals at their own pace. Talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team before starting the exercises in this booklet, and let them know about your progress. The timelines suggested are only to guide you. Some exercises can be started right after surgery. Exercises that involve moving your shoulders and arms can usually be started once you've had your drain removed. Strengthening and general conditioning exercises can be added to your routine when you’ve healed more.
Before Getting Started

It’s important to talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team before starting any exercises. Your doctor may suggest particular exercises, or suggest that you see a physiotherapist or occupational therapist who can help design an exercise plan for you.

These general guidelines can help you develop a successful exercise routine:

• Wear comfortable, loose clothing.
• Exercise after a warm shower when your muscles are warm and relaxed.
• Breathe deeply and often as you do each exercise.
• Do the exercises until you feel a gentle stretch, not pain.
• Do not bounce or make any jerky moves while stretching.
• Contact your doctor if you have any unexplained swelling or pain.
• Don’t over-exercise. Exercises and daily activities should not be painful. Increased pain, discomfort and swelling are often signs that you are doing too much.

Finding a physiotherapist

To find a physiotherapist in your area who works with women who have had breast cancer surgery, visit the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's website at www.physiotherapy.ca/findaphysio.htm. You can also ask your doctor for a referral or talk to other women who have had breast cancer.
Right after Surgery
(the first 3 to 10 days)

These gentle exercises should be done the first week after surgery or while the drain is still in place. It’s normal to feel the skin and tissue pull and stretch a bit with these exercises, but take care not to make any sudden movements until the incision has healed and the drain has been removed. Repeat these exercises 3 to 4 times a day.

If you feel sore, numb or tingling

You may feel sore, numb or a tingling or burning feeling on the back of your arm or your chest wall if surgery has irritated some of your nerve endings. These feelings may increase a few weeks after surgery. Keep doing the exercises unless you notice an increase in swelling or tenderness. If this happens, tell your doctor. Sometimes gentle rubbing or stroking the area with your hand or with a soft cloth can help make it feel better.
Pump it up

This exercise helps reduce swelling after surgery by using your muscles as a pump to improve the circulation in your affected arm (on the same side as your surgery).

1. Try lying on your unaffected side with your affected arm straight out, above the level of your heart (use pillows if you need to). Or sit in a chair with good back support with your arm supported by pillows.

2. Slowly open and close your hand. Repeat 15 to 25 times.

3. Then slowly bend and straighten your elbow. Repeat 15 to 25 times.
Shoulder shrugs and circles

This exercise can be done sitting or standing.

1. Lift both shoulders up towards your ears. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds and then slowly drop them down and relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

2. Gently rotate both shoulders forward and up, and then slowly back and down, making a circle. Switch and repeat in the opposite direction.

3. Repeat 5 to 10 times in each direction.
Arm lifts

This exercise can be done sitting or standing.

1. Clasp your hands together in front of your chest. Extend your elbows out.

2. Slowly lift your arms upwards until a gentle stretch is felt.

3. Hold for 1 to 2 seconds and then slowly return to the start position.

4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.
Shoulder blade squeeze

This exercise helps improve movement in your shoulder and your posture.

1. Sit in a chair facing straight ahead without resting your back on the chair, or stand up. Your arms should be at your side with your elbows bent.
2. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together. Keep your shoulders level and take care not to lift up or shrug your shoulders.
3. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds. Relax and return to the start position.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.
Deep breathing

Deep breathing will help with relaxation and to remind you to fill your lungs completely.

1. Try lying on your back and take a slow, deep breath. Breathe in as much air as you can while trying to expand your chest and stomach like a balloon.

2. Relax and breathe out slowly and completely.

3. Repeat 4 or 5 times.

Help to reduce swelling after surgery

At the end of the day, or during the day when you have some time, consider propping your arm up to help with swelling after surgery.
First Stage of Healing
(the first 6 weeks after surgery)

Once your drain has been removed, it is important to start working on getting back the full use of your shoulder. Begin with these easy exercises and then move on to the more advanced exercises once you feel stronger. By the end of this stage, you should have full movement of your affected arm and shoulder.

Talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team before beginning any of these exercises.

Avoid heavy lifting
During this stage of healing, don’t lift anything heavier than about 5 kg (10 lbs).
Wand exercise (3 positions)

This exercise helps improve the forward movement of your shoulder. You will need a “wand” to do this exercise – try a broom handle, stick or a cane. You should not feel any pain or pinching during these exercises. If you do, stop the movement before the point of pain or pinching.

Position 1

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Hold your wand with both hands (your palms should be facing down) and your hands should be shoulder-width apart.
2. Lift the wand over your head as far as you can go until you feel a stretch. Your unaffected arm will help lift the wand.
3. Hold for 1 to 2 seconds. Lower arms.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Position 2 Repeat with palms still facing down but slightly wider than your hips or shoulders.

Position 3 Repeat with palms facing up (undergrip) and hands hip-distance apart.
1. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Clasp your hands behind your neck with your elbows pointed up to the ceiling. (If you are unable to comfortably place your hands behind your neck, place your fingers on your forehead with your palms facing up.)

2. Move your elbows apart and down to the bed (or floor). Hold for 1 to 2 seconds.

3. Repeat 5 to 10 times.
Posture

This exercise helps improve movement in your shoulder and your posture. You may find it easier to check your movements by sitting in front of a mirror.

1. Sit in a chair facing straight ahead without resting your back on the chair, or stand up. Your arms should be at your side with your elbows straight and your palms facing your sides.

2. Open your chest, gently squeeze your shoulder blades together, and rotate your thumbs so your palms face forward.

3. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds. Relax and return to the start position.

4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.
Wall climbing

This exercise helps increase movement in your shoulder. Try to reach a little higher up on the wall each day.

1. Stand facing the wall, about 5 cm (2 inches) away. Place both your hands on the wall at shoulder level.

2. Use your fingers to climb up or slide as high as you can go until you feel a stretch. It may help you relax if you rest your forehead on the wall.

3. Return to start position.

4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.
**Snow angels**

This exercise can be done lying down on the floor or on a bed.

1. Lie on your back and extend your arms out at your sides.

2. Move them up to your head and down to your thighs, and repeat (as if you’re making an angel in the snow).
More advanced exercises

Once you are getting good movement in your shoulder, try these more advanced stretches.

Side bends

This exercise helps improve movement on both sides of your body.

1. Sit in a chair and clasp your hands together in your lap.
2. Slowly lift your arms over your head. Keep your elbows bent slightly.
3. When your arms are above your head, bend at your waist and move your body to the right. Hold 1 to 2 seconds.
4. Return to the centre and then bend to the left.
5. Repeat 5 to 10 times.
Doorway stretch

This exercise helps increase movement in your shoulder.

1. Stand in a doorway and place each hand lightly on either side of the doorframe.
2. Slide your hands up as far as possible.
3. Return to start position.
4. Repeat 5 to 7 times.

Achieving full movement of your arm

Continue doing these exercises until both arms are equally strong and can move easily. This may take 2 to 3 months. When you can reach across the top of your head and touch your opposite ear without feeling a stretch in your underarm, then you have achieved full movement of your arm.
Second Stage of Healing  
(from about 6 weeks after surgery)

As you feel stronger, you can gradually introduce strengthening and general conditioning exercises into your routine. For some women, this will mean getting back to their old routines, while for others it may mean trying out some new activities.

Talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team about starting a specific strengthening program or aerobic exercise, and whether there are any special precautions you should take.

If you have pain, your shoulder is tight, or if your hand or arm begins to swell, talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team.

Strengthening

Slowly getting back to household chores, gardening or yardwork are some of the ways you can continue to build your strength.

Within 4 to 6 weeks after surgery, you can also begin doing strengthening exercises with light weights (500 g to 1 kg or 1 to 2 lbs). If you don’t have any light weights, you can use an unopened soup can or a plastic bottle filled with water. Check with your doctor or physiotherapist to decide what weight is best for you. They can also suggest strengthening exercises for the upper body that are suitable for you.
General conditioning

Regular aerobic exercise, which is any exercise that gets your heart and lungs working hard, will improve your general physical condition. It can help with your recovery and has many benefits. It can:

- help improve your cardiovascular fitness, which is how well your heart, lungs and blood vessels deliver oxygen to your muscles, so that you can do physical work for longer periods of time
- help you maintain a healthy body weight
- help you feel better, which may reduce stress and anxiety
- help you as you face the challenges of living with cancer

Brisk walking, swimming, running, cycling, cross-country skiing and dancing are all examples of aerobic exercise.
Lymphedema

As part of your ongoing recovery following surgery, you should be aware of the possibility of lymphedema. Lymphedema is swelling caused by a buildup of lymph fluid in part of the body. The swelling happens because lymph nodes, which normally act as filters, aren’t able to do their job because they’ve been removed by surgery, or they’ve been damaged by radiation therapy or the cancer itself. Lymphedema is different from the swelling in the breast, armpit and arm areas that can happen just after surgery.

Lymphedema can happen soon after treatment, months or even years later. It can be a temporary or a long-term condition.

Watching for signs of lymphedema

The start of lymphedema can be very hard to notice, but it is very important to treat it quickly. Tell your doctor right away if you notice swelling in your hand or arm, even if it happens years after treatment. Some other signs to watch for are:

- feeling of fullness, puffiness or heaviness in the arm
- skin feeling tight
- decreased flexibility of movement in the hand, wrist or arm
- jewellery (including watches) feeling tight even though your weight hasn’t changed
- problems fitting your arm into your sleeves
- redness or increased warmth, which may mean that you have an infection
Ways to prevent or manage lymphedema

These tips on caring for your arm on the side where you had surgery may help to prevent lymphedema. If you do develop lymphedema, they will help you manage it:

- Take special care of your skin. Try to avoid breaks in the skin that could lead to infection.
  - Keep your arm moisturized. This will help keep the skin supple and prevent it from becoming dry and cracked. Healthy skin will help your body avoid infection.
  - Wash the area well with soap and water if you get a cut or burn on the arm or hand. Keeping it clean is also important. Your doctor or pharmacist may suggest you use an antibacterial cream or ointment.
  - Treat infections as soon as possible. Your doctor may suggest that you have an emergency supply of an antibiotic at home, just in case.
  - Wear sunscreen to avoid sunburn, especially on your arm and chest.
  - Wear insect repellent to avoid bug bites.
  - Do not cut the cuticles back when you manicure your hands. Push them back.
  - Be careful when shaving under your arm.
  - Use your other arm to have blood samples or your blood pressure taken, or for injections, whenever possible.
  - Wear work gloves when gardening or doing other outdoor chores.
  - Wear loose-fitting gloves when working with household cleaning products, or when your hands are in water for a long time.
  - Use a thimble when sewing to protect your fingers from getting pricked by needles or pins.

- Avoid using the arm on the same side as your surgery to lift or carry anything heavy, such as a suitcase.

- Exercise regularly, but don’t overdo it. Moving your arm and contracting the muscles as you exercise will help move fluid through your arm. Talk to your doctor about the right exercise for you. Increase your exercise gradually and watch how your body responds.
• Maintain an ideal body weight. If you are overweight, you have a greater chance of getting lymphedema and it may be more difficult to control or treat.

• Check with your doctor before using any hormones, including hormone creams.

• Avoid tight-fitting cuffs, watchbands, bracelets and rings, and tight or narrow bra straps. All may prevent the fluid from flowing away from the swollen area.

• Use saunas, steam baths and hot tubs with care. Heat can make lymphedema worse.

• Travel with care. Some women find that their lymphedema is worse when they travel to a hot climate. If you have a compression sleeve, your doctor or nurse may suggest that you wear it when flying.
Resources

To contact the Canadian Cancer Society:

• Call us toll-free at 1 888 939-3333 (Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.).
• E-mail us at info@cis.cancer.ca.
• Visit our website at www.cancer.ca.
• Contact your local Canadian Cancer Society office.

Our services are free and confidential.
What we do

Thanks to the work of our volunteers and staff, and the generosity of our donors, the Canadian Cancer Society is leading the way in the fight against cancer. The Canadian Cancer Society:

• funds excellent research for all types of cancer
• advocates for healthy public policy
• promotes healthy lifestyles to help reduce cancer risk
• provides information about cancer
• supports people living with cancer

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