

Breast care after surgery



Information for patients

This leaflet gives you advice about recovering from breast surgery and explains the exercises you should do each day. It also has some general advice about returning to your normal daily activity and exercise. If you have any other questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to the team caring for you.

Confirming your identity

Before you have a treatment or procedure, our staff will ask you your **name** and **date of birth** and check your **ID band**. If you don't have an ID band we will also ask you to confirm your address.

If we don't ask these questions, then please ask us to check.

Ensuring your safety is our primary concern.

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Who is this leaflet suitable for?

This leaflet is suitable for people who have had or will be having:

- breast surgery (not reconstruction)
- sentinel lymph node biopsy or axillary node clearance
- radiotherapy
- chemotherapy

If you have had breast reconstruction surgery, you may be given a different leaflet and will need to follow a different exercise plan. If you are unsure which is the correct leaflet for you, please speak to your breast care nurse or physiotherapist before starting.

How will doing exercises help me?

They can:

- prevent shoulder stiffness and help you to regain the movement you had before your surgery
- improve symptoms of tightness and cording (see further p 8)
- aid circulation and help scar healing



- help to reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema (see further p 8)
- improve your arm movement so you are prepared for the position of radiotherapy should you need it

The exercises

Warm up and cool down exercises

Do these before and after your stage 1 or 2 exercises. You can do them standing up or sitting down.

Shoulder shrug: Keep your arms loose and relaxed by your sides. Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears and lower gently back down. Repeat 5 times.

Shoulder circling: Keep your arms loose and relaxed by your sides. Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears, then circle them back and down. Repeat 5 times.

Stage 1 and stage 2 exercises

There are two stages to your exercise plan:

Stage 1 Start these exercises gently the day after your operation. Continue for one week.

Stage 2 Start these exercises one week after your operation (or once any drains are removed). Continue until your arm feels back to your normal.

We recommend that you do each exercise 5 times and repeat the sequence 4 times a day.

When exercises ask for you to sit or lie down, please place your legs and feet in whatever position feels comfortable to you.



Complete your exercises slowly and gently. You should feel a stretch when exercising, but not pain. If needed, we recommend you take your painkillers (as prescribed) 30 minutes before you exercise.

Stage 1 exercises

You can do these sitting down or standing up.

You are only moving the top part of your body as in the picture.

Bent arm forwards

- Bend your elbows and rest your hands lightly on your shoulders.
- Raise both your arms upwards and forwards so they are at right angles to your body.
- Lower your elbows slowly.
- Repeat 5 times.



Bent arm sideways

- Bend your elbows and rest your hands lightly on your shoulders.
- Raise both your arms out to the side so they are at right angles to your body.
- Lower your elbows slowly.
- Repeat 5 times.



Back scratching

- Hold your arms out to the sides and bend your elbows.
- Slowly reach up behind your back to just under your shoulder blades.



- Slowly lower your arms back down to your sides.
- Repeat 5 times.

Winging it

- Place your hands behind your head with your elbows pointing forwards.
- Slowly move your elbows back so they are pointing out to the sides, and then return to starting position.
- Repeat 5 times.



Stage 2 exercises

Start these exercises in the second week after your operation.

Remember to do the warm up and cool down. If you experience any issues with swelling, pain or infection, please speak to your surgeon or breast care nurse.

Arm lifts

- Lie on your back.
- Clasp your hands together.
- Keep your elbows straight and lift your arms up and over your head as far as you can to feel a mild stretch, then slowly lower.
- If you have difficulty lying down, you can do this exercise sitting down.
- Repeat 5 times.



Wall climbing

- Stand facing the wall and 'walk' your hand upwards, moving closer to the wall the higher you get.
- You can mark the wall as a reference point, to see how you progress, aiming to get higher each time.
- Take to where you feel a stretch.
- Hold and count to 10.
- Lower arm back down.
- Repeat 5 times.



Sideways wall climbing

- Stand sideways to the wall with your affected side nearest the wall.
- Put your hand on the wall at shoulder level.
- Walk your hand up the wall sideways, moving closer to the wall the higher you get.
- Take to where you feel a stretch, hold for a count of 10.
- Lower arm back down.
- Repeat 5 times.



Elbow push

- Lie on your back with your hands behind your head and your elbows out to the sides.
- Gently push your elbows downwards into the bed, or floor, as far as is comfortable.
- Hold and count to ten, and then relax.
- Repeat 5 times.



How long shall I do the exercises for?

Arm stiffness and weakness can continue for some time after surgery and radiotherapy, so it is important to exercise regularly. If you have had surgery, keep doing the exercises until your shoulder movement has returned to the level you had before your operation. If you are going to have radiotherapy, keep doing the exercises throughout radiotherapy, and then for as long as you are still experiencing tightness and stiffness afterwards.

Reasons to stop exercising

Speak to your doctor or breast care nurse if you have:

- a wound infection or healing issues
- worsening pain
- a seroma (a collection of fluid under the arm, in the breast, or chest wall)

Remember that some swelling is a normal reaction to surgery and a natural stage of how your body heals. If you are concerned, please contact your breast care nurse.



Is there anything else I can do to help improve my arm movement?

- Once your wound has completely healed, gently massage it to help break down the scar tissue. This will relieve any tightness and help you to move your arm more easily.
- Be aware of your posture. Poor posture can make your muscles tight and prevent you from moving your arm properly as well as increasing your pain. Try to avoid slouching by gently lifting your chest bone and keeping your shoulders level.

Are there any changes I should be aware of?

Cording

Some women develop what feels like a tight band or cord running from their armpit into their arm. Cording may limit your arm movement and can be painful but is nothing to be worried about. You can relieve the symptoms by doing your exercises. Please contact your physiotherapist if you develop cording, especially if you are due to start radiotherapy very soon.

Seroma

If you experience a seroma (pocket of swelling after surgery) please be guided by your healthcare professional regarding your exercise plan.

Lymphoedema

Some women may develop swelling in their arm or breast months or years after their surgery. This might be lymphoedema. Your breast care nurse or physiotherapist will discuss this with you and advise you how to minimise the risk.



Recovery after surgery and return to previous activities

Repetitive tasks and heavy lifting

Take care with repetitive household tasks such as dusting or vacuuming for 4 to 6 weeks after surgery, as they may increase swelling, or cause achiness or heaviness in the affected arm(s).

Avoid heavy lifting and carrying, especially above shoulder height, for 4 to 6 weeks after your operation, or until your scars have healed. Return to these activities gradually and make sure you pace yourself with regular breaks.

Exercise, hobbies and sport

Start gentle exercise, such as walking, immediately after your surgery. This can help to maintain strength and fitness, reduce tiredness, boost mood and overall aid recovery. It can also help to minimise possible side effects. Do this gradually, pacing your return to exercise and sport.

At 8 to 12 weeks, if you have had no complications, you should be working towards resuming your normal levels of activity. For general health we recommend 150 minutes (2½ hours) each week of moderate intensity activity. During moderate intensity exercise your heart rate and breathing rate should increase, and you might break into a sweat, but you should still be able hold a conversation.

Swimming

Swimming is a great form of exercise and can benefit lymphatic drainage. Do not swim until your scars are fully healed. You should be able to continue to swim during radiotherapy, but please speak to your team for individual advice. You should check with your oncologist about swimming during chemotherapy.



Pilates and yoga

Both are excellent forms of activity after breast surgery. We recommend a gradual return. You should not try any positions where you weight bear through your arms until you are six weeks after surgery. You should return to these positions gradually and not hold any static positions through your arms for longer than 10 seconds without a rest or moving into another position off your arms.

Additional considerations:

Driving

We recommend you do not drive until you feel confident that you have full range of movement in your arm, the seat belt sits comfortably across your chest wall, and you can safely and confidently handle the gear stick and handbrake and perform an emergency stop.

Further physiotherapy

You may need more physiotherapy if:

- a shoulder restriction is causing you problems in your daily activities
- you are unable to regain your shoulder movement 4 weeks after surgery
- you have cording
- you are unable to reach the radiotherapy position (if relevant)
- you are having difficulty returning to your normal levels of physical activity
- you are experiencing fatigue which is impacting your ability to do or return to your normal activities



Who do I contact with queries or concerns?

Remember this is a general guide and recovery is individual. If you have any concerns regarding the surgery, please speak with your surgeon or breast care nurse. If you have questions about returning to exercise or physical activity, please speak with the physiotherapist (020 3299 3085) or ask to join the monthly post-surgery education group led by the physiotherapist.

How to arrange physiotherapy

You can be referred by your breast care nurse or consultant or GP. Alternatively, you can call **020 3299 3085** and ask to speak to the breast physiotherapist. If they are unavailable, please leave a message and they will call you back. Please be aware that the physiotherapist is based at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, but can offer telephone and virtual appointments to patients who can't travel to this clinic.

Further support:

Breast Cancer Care

For further support and advice visit www.breastcancernow.org or call the free helpline: 0808 800 6000.

Macmillan Information and Support Centre

The Macmillan drop-in centre, located in the Cicely Saunders Institute, at King's College Hospital, provides information, help and support to patients with a cancer diagnosis. They can also assist your carers, relatives and friends. Find out more at www.kch.nhs.uk

Cancer Wellbeing London

This website has further online information and videos about health and wellbeing topics and events in your area
www.cancerwellbeinglondon.nhs.uk

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

Tel: **020 3299 3601**

Email: **kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net**

PALS at Princess Royal University Hospital, Farnborough Common, Orpington, Kent BR6 8ND

Tel: **01689 863252**

Email: **kch-tr.palspruh@nhs.net**

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Communications and Interpreting telephone line on 020 3299 4826 or email kch-tr.accessibility@nhs.net