

**TREATMENT AND SIDE EFFECTS**

# Exercises after breast cancer surgery

# Why do I need to do these exercises after my breast surgery?

These exercises can help you regain arm and shoulder movement after surgery and radiotherapy for breast cancer.

Muscles and joints can seize up very quickly if they're not used, so it's important to do these exercises as part of your daily routine.

The exercises can also help:

- Improve symptoms that may be caused by tight scars and cording (when a build-up of scar tissue causes blood vessels to become stuck, and you feel as if you have a tight cord running down your affected arm)
- Prevent long-term problems with arm and shoulder movement, posture and stiffness
- Reduce the risk of lymphoedema (swelling of the arm, hand, breast or chest area caused by a build-up of lymph fluid)

If you're worried about any of these, speak to your breast care nurse or physiotherapist as soon as possible. You should also contact your breast care nurse or physiotherapist as soon as possible if you:

- Had shoulder problems before your surgery
- Develop symptoms of cording after surgery
- Develop a seroma (a collection of fluid that forms under a wound after an operation) after surgery

# Who are the exercises suitable for?

The exercises have been developed with the help of breast surgeons, breast care nurses and physiotherapists.

The exercises are suitable for people who have had:

- Breast surgery
- Lymph node removal
- Radiotherapy

If you've recently had a breast reconstruction, or any other type of surgery, talk to your surgeon, breast care nurse or physiotherapist before you start any exercises. You should always follow their advice.

# When should I start the exercises?

Ideally, you should start these exercises before your surgery. This is so you can begin to build up flexibility and movement in your arm and shoulder before surgery.

You should then aim to begin the exercises again the day after your surgery.

If you feel unable to start the exercises within a couple of days of your surgery, speak to your breast care nurse or physiotherapist.

Don't worry if you can't manage to do all the exercises every time. You may find the exercises harder at certain times of your treatment, for example during radiotherapy. Do as much as you feel you can but try to do something every day.

# How should the exercises feel?

You should not feel pain when doing the exercises. However, a stretching or pulling sensation is normal. The more you do the exercises, the easier they should become.

Always do the warm-up at the start and the cool-down at the end of each session to help avoid injury and prevent stiffness.

You may be advised to take some pain relief before doing the exercises.

If at any time you become concerned about your range of movement or level of discomfort, speak to your breast care nurse or physiotherapist.



## When to stop the exercises

Stop doing the exercises and speak to your surgeon, physiotherapist or breast care nurse as soon as possible if you have:

- A seroma
- A wound infection or problems with your wound healing
- Pain that gets worse during these exercises or continues once you've finished them

Start the exercises again when your surgeon, physiotherapist or breast care nurse says it's safe to do so.

## How long should I continue doing the exercises?

### If you've had surgery

If you've had surgery, keep doing the exercises until you've got back the range of movement you had before your operation. Continue doing the exercises if you're going to have radiotherapy, as they will help your shoulder flexibility.

### If you've had radiotherapy

If you've had radiotherapy, it's a good idea to do the exercises for as long as you're still feeling tightness and stiffness.

Arm stiffness and weakness can happen after radiotherapy. So continue doing the exercises, or some form of stretching, to maintain your range of movement and use of your arm.

Talk to your breast care nurse or physiotherapist if:

- You're having difficulty getting your range of movement back
- You're not sure how long to continue the exercises
- You have concerns about your recovery after surgery

# Warm-up and cool-down

Read the information on the other side of the leaflet before you start, especially the section called “When to stop the exercises”.

1

## Shoulder shrugs

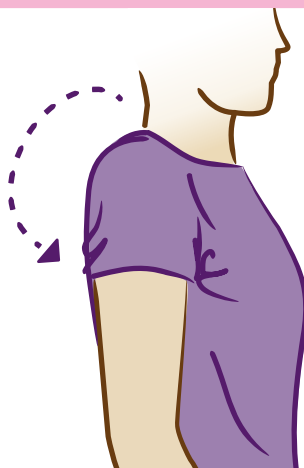
- Keep your arms loose and relaxed by your sides
- Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears and lower gently back down



2

## Shoulder circling

- Keep your arms loose and relaxed by your sides
- Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears, then circle them back and down



## Basic exercises

You can do these exercises sitting down or standing up.

During the first week after surgery, do not raise your arms above shoulder level (90 degrees) when doing these exercises.

3

### Bent arm forwards

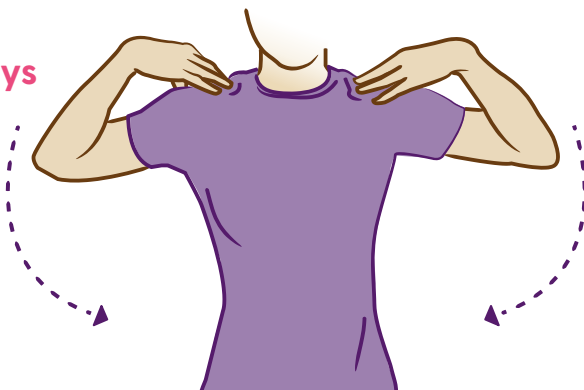
- Bend your elbows and rest your hands lightly on your shoulders
- Raise both your arms forward so they are at right angles to your body
- Lower your elbows slowly



4

### Bent arm sideways

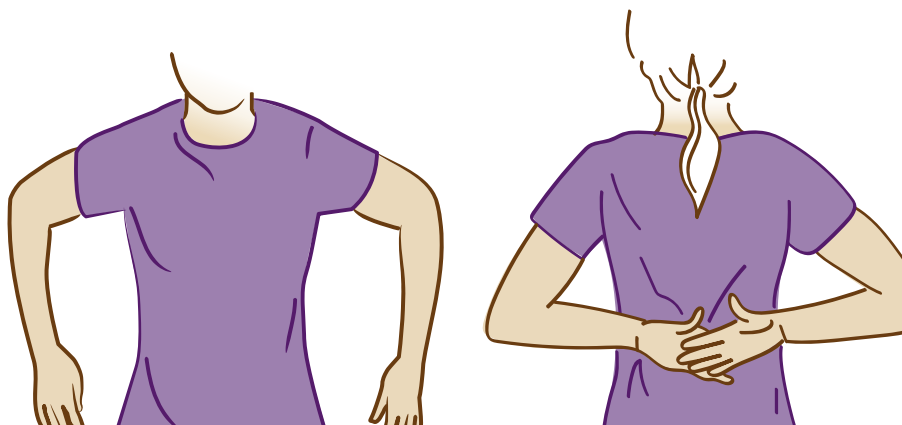
- Rest your hands on your shoulders, but this time raise your elbows out to the sides
- Lower your elbows slowly



5

## Back scratching

- Hold your arms out to the sides and bend your arms from the elbow
- Slowly reach up behind your back to just under your shoulder blades
- Slowly lower your arms back down to your sides



6

## Winging it

- Place your hands behind your head with your elbows pointing forwards
- Bring your elbows back so they're pointing out to the sides, then return to the starting position



# Advanced exercises

## 7

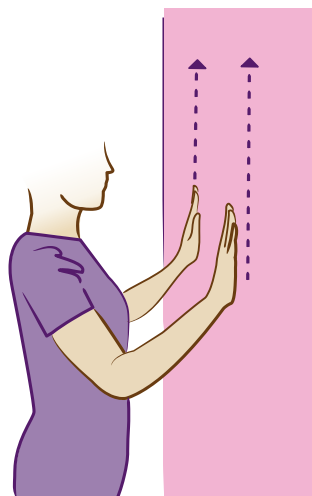
### Wall climbing

#### Step 1

With your feet apart, stand close to and facing a wall. Put both hands on the wall at shoulder level.

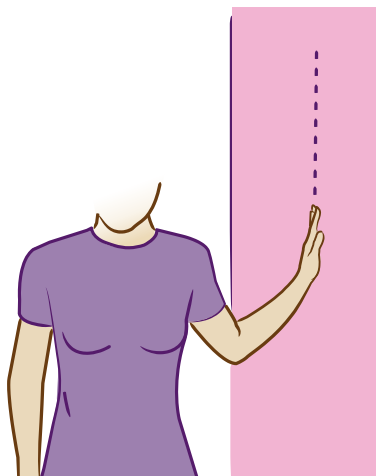
- Looking straight ahead, gradually work your hands up the wall – sliding them or using your fingers to climb. Get as far as you can, to feel a stretch but not pain
- Hold here and count to 10
- Slide your hands back to shoulder level before repeating the exercise

Try to get higher each time.



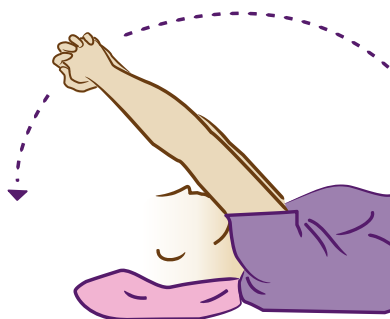
#### Step 2

- Stand sideways with your affected side nearest the wall
- Put your hand on the wall, keeping your elbow bent and your shoulders relaxed
- Look straight ahead and gradually creep your hand up the wall as far as you can, allowing your elbow to straighten
- Hold here and count to 10, then lower your hand back down



## Arm lifts

- Lie on the bed or floor with a cushion or pillow to support your head
- Take three or four really deep breaths and concentrate on relaxing your shoulders so they are not hunched up towards your ears
- Clasp your hands together or hold onto a stick or broom handle. Keep your elbows straight and lift your arms up and over your head as far as you feel comfortable
- Hold them here and count to 10, then lower your arms slowly. You may find it useful to put a pillow behind you to support your arms until you're able to get them further back



### Alternative

If you have difficulty lying down – for example because of breathlessness – you can do this exercise in a sitting position, leaning back in your chair.

## 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 10, then relax



### Alternative

If you have difficulty lying completely flat, you can do this exercise with your head and upper back propped on a few pillows. As you get more comfortable, try to reduce the number of pillows you are using.

# When to do the exercises

- Repeat each exercise 5 times before moving on to the next one
- Try to do the exercises 3 times a day (morning, around midday and evening) for the first 3 months
- After 3 months, and once your arm is back to normal, continue exercises 1, 3 and 6 once a day to help reduce discomfort and stiffness in the future

## Week 1

Warm-up

1 2

Basic exercises

3 4 5 6

Cool-down

1 2

## Week 2 and beyond\*

Warm-up

1 2

Basic exercises

3 4 5 6

Advanced exercises

7 8 9

Cool-down

1 2

\* If you have removable stitches or a drain, wait until these have been removed

# About this information

**Exercises after breast cancer surgery** was written by Breast Cancer Now's clinical specialists, and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast cancer.



For a full list of the sources we used to research it:  
Email [health-info@breastcancer.org](mailto:health-info@breastcancer.org)



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