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Patient Information

Exercises and Advice following your Breast Surgery

This is an information leaflet for people who have had breast surgery.

It contains exercises that your physiotherapist would like you to perform and also contains general advice to help you get back to your normal daily routine.

Why should you do exercises?

Physiotherapy is extremely important following your breast surgery to minimise the loss of shoulder movement and function on your operated side. The exercises in this booklet will prevent stiffness and keep the scar mobile after your surgery.

Exercise will also help to strengthen your arm muscles, relieve and control pain, and aid tissue healing.

It is common to feel a pulling or stretching sensation when you start exercising.

Make sure you take your pain killers regularly, especially before your exercises - as prescribed by your doctor. This will allow your arm to move more freely.

General guidelines when exercising:

- Make time for your exercises in your daily routine
- Do the exercises slowly, smoothly and gently
- Have a short rest between each exercise
- Keep your repetitions low for each specific exercise, and short regular sessions are recommended
- Remember to follow the guidance in this booklet

If you experience continuing pain which worsens, then ask for further advice from your physiotherapist, breast care nurse or GP.

General Points

Following breast surgery you may experience changes in sensation over your breast and inner arm (e.g. numbness, tingling or extra sensitivity to touch). These sensations are quite normal and often subside a few months after your surgery.

Gentle stroking or tapping of your inner arm may ease the discomfort, however you may be left with some residual numbness.

Remember to continue these exercises until you have regained full movement.

If you have had lymph node surgery, a common symptom is 'cording'. This is hardening of the lymphatic vessels in the armpit and you might feel or see a tight cord running down part of your arm. This is resolved by continuing your regular exercises and stretching of your arm. If this symptom persists contact your breast care nurse.

Lifting

Be aware of lifting heavy objects with your affected arm. Listen to your body and stop if it is too heavy and causes you discomfort.

If at any time you experience localised redness, heat or swelling around the wound, armpit or arm then you need to see your GP as soon as possible.

Advice on using your arm after your breast surgery

Massage

Once the wound is healed and dry (usually around 4 weeks after your operation) you should use a non-aqueous cream such as epaderm to massage your scar.

It is sometimes helpful to get someone to do this for you.

Driving:

Do not commence driving until you feel confident that you are safe and able to react in an emergency.

Lymphoedema:

The tissues in the body are surrounded by a colourless fluid containing mainly water and protein. This fluid is known as lymph and provides nourishment to the tissues. Most of the fluid is drained away by the veins but the excess lymph fluid is drained by lymphatic vessels and filtered by lymph nodes before returning into the blood stream. This system is known as the lymphatic system.

If the lymphatic system is impaired through removal of lymph node(s), or disease the excess fluid can build up and cause swelling. This is known as lymphoedema.

Physical Activity:

Light physical activities e.g. walking, may be beneficial during the recovery phase. Please speak to your physiotherapist / breast care nurse for specific exercise advice.

Skin Care:

Daily attention to skin care can help to prevent lymphoedema. Sometime lymphoedema can develop following an infection called cellulitis. This section will highlight how to prevent infection and how to look after your skin:

- Look at your skin to check for cuts, scratches or burns which could cause an infection
- Wash your skin daily with a pH neutral cleanser or soap
- Moisturise your skin with a non-aqueous cream eg: diprobase or epiderm to keep the skin supple and prevent the build up of dry skin
- Always wear gloves for washing up, gardening and other household tasks
- Take great care when cutting your nails
- Use depilatory cream or an electric razor to remove unwanted hair from under your arm
- Avoid being bitten or scratched by pets or other animals
- Use an insect repellent when you are at risk of being bitten, such as when you're on holiday or gardening
- Protect your skin from the sun by wearing a high factor sun lotion (15 and above) or keep covered
- Avoid restrictive clothing and tight jewellery
- Avoid heavy lifting and repetitive actions
- Avoid hot baths, showers, saunas and jacuzzis as the heat could increase your risk of developing swelling
- Do not have blood samples, blood pressure or injections taken on your 'at risk' arm

Skin infections

Skin infections such as cellulitis could cause lymphoedema so it is vital that you check for signs of infection. Symptoms can appear suddenly and make you feel unwell very quickly.

Signs of infection can include:

- Swelling of your limb
- Your limb feels hot to your touch
- Redness or rash of your limb
- Pain
- High temperature
- Generally feeling unwell as though you have the flu

What do I do if I think I have a skin infection?

- Mark the inflamed area with a ballpoint pen
- Do not over-exercise your limb
- If symptoms spread outside the affected area contact your GP or breast care nurse immediately as you may need antibiotics

The first three days after your surgery

Immediately after surgery you should avoid:

- Reaching your arm behind your back
- Excessive reaching above your head
- Excessive reaching out to the side of your body
- Any vigorous activities such as carrying heavy items, pushing up out of a chair or bed or pulling with your operated arm

Your Exercises

Warm Up:

- Start with your shoulders relaxed
- Roll your shoulders forwards
- Lower them slowly
- Return to your starting position
- Repeat, rolling your shoulders backwards



Repeat 5 times

Exercise One

- Place your hand on your shoulder
- Straighten your arm out and bend it again keeping your arm below shoulder height



Repeat 5 times

Exercise Two

- Place your hand on your shoulder
- Straighten your arm out to the side and bend your elbow again



Repeat 5 times

Once your drains are out, when your pain is controlled and when you feel ready, you can progress on to the following exercises:

These gentle exercises are designed to regain movement and stretch the scar tissue

Exercise Three

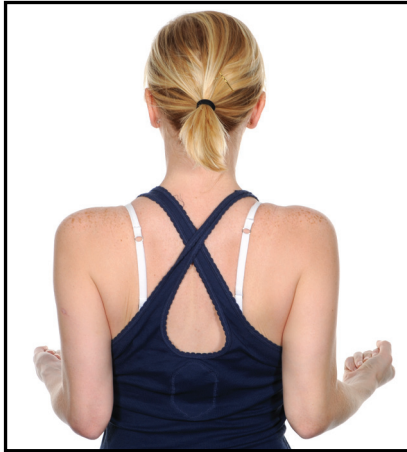
- Clasp your hands behind your neck
- Keep your head up, push your elbows out to the side and then back to the middle



Repeat 5 times

Exercise Four

- Squeeze your shoulders together while pushing your elbows back



Repeat 5 times

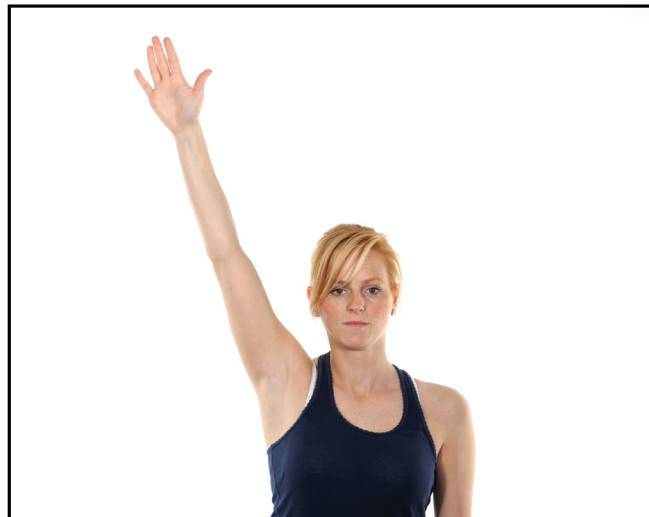
Exercise Five

- Place your arm by your side with your elbow straight
- Raise your arm forwards and up above your head, leading with your thumb
- Then slowly bring it back down, keeping your elbow as straight as possible



Exercise Six

- Place your arm by your side with your elbow straight
- Raise your arm out to the side away from your body, leading with your thumb, and continue up towards your head
- Slowly bring your arm back down again



Repeat 5 times

Notes:

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[illegible]

*This leaflet was written by Health Professionals.
The information contained in this leaflet is evidence based, and
has been approved by physiotherapists and patients.
It is reviewed and updated every 2 years.*

20/04/2015

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