

## INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

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### Physiotherapy Service

# Exercise and advice following breast surgery

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**This leaflet contains information to help you recover following your breast surgery.**

It offers advice on how to help prevent complications such as arm stiffness as well as how to use your arm, exercises, relaxation techniques, returning to activities and general points to be aware of after surgery.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the breast care physiotherapy team on telephone **01623 672384 (between 8am-4.30pm, Monday to Friday).**

#### **Where is Physiotherapy?**

Enter the hospital via the main entrance. Physiotherapy is located in the King's Treatment Centre, in **clinic 10**.

#### **On your arrival**

Please report to the therapy reception desk.

#### **If you are unable to attend your appointment**

Please try to contact us as soon as possible so the appointment can be given to another patient.

### **Part 1 – early exercises and advice (day 1 up to 3 weeks after your operation)**

#### **Before your operation**

Try to stop smoking. Stopping smoking will reduce the risk of complications during and after surgery, it will improve your skins healing ability and your long-term health.

#### **After your operation:**

- **Deep breathing**

This helps to reduce the effect of the anaesthetic. It can help you relax, reducing feelings of sickness and relieve pain.

Try the following breathing exercises for the first few days after your operation:

- Sit up in your chair or bed.
- Take a deep breath in through your nose, then gently sigh out, relaxing your shoulders.
- If you feel 'chesty' take a few deep breaths and then 'huff' by squeezing the air out quickly through your mouth using your stomach and chest muscles.

- Aim to repeat these steps about 2-3 times an hour.

- **Foot and ankle circulation exercises**

To reduce the risk of developing a blood clot in your legs, it is important to follow some simple steps while you are resting in the bed or chair:

- Circle both ankles about 10 times one way and then repeat in the other direction.
- Bend at the ankle pulling up your toes and then pushing your toes away to a point about 10 times.

### What bra should I wear after surgery?

A soft, non-wired, supportive bra with deep sides is ideal. For example, a post-operative (after surgery), maternity or sports bra. We recommend that you sleep in the bra for the first week after surgery if you are comfortable.

### Exercises

After your surgery it is important to complete exercises regularly. These will:

- Prevent neck, shoulder, or arm stiffness.
- Promote normal arm function and movement.
- Assist in normal scar healing and flexibility.
- Help to improve circulation and reduce swelling from surgery.
- Reduce the risks of developing lymphoedema (swelling due to a build-up of lymph fluid in the arm).



- Enable your arm to get into the position shown above for radiotherapy, if required.

### When should I start exercising?

Try to start the day after your surgery. The sooner you start the more benefit you should have.

### How often should I exercise?

Build up to completing **10 of each exercise, 3 times a day.**

## Early exercises

### 1. Circulatory exercises

#### a. Hand pumps

Make a fist, then stretch your fingers out straight.



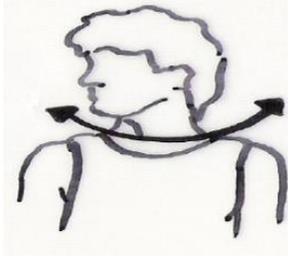
#### b. Elbow bends

Slowly bend and straighten your elbow.



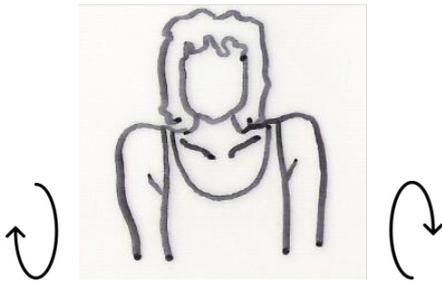
### 2. Neck turns

Slowly turn your head to one side and then slowly to the other, if you are able, try to let your chin drop down to your chest as you turn. Stop if you experience any dizziness.



### 3. Shoulder rolls

Roll your shoulders forwards and then backwards.



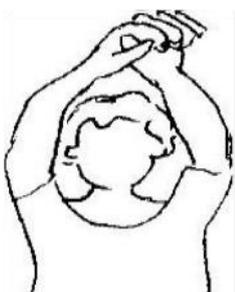
### 4. Shoulder stretch

Use your good arm to help lift up your operated arm. Aim to reach your forehead in the 1<sup>st</sup> week.



1<sup>st</sup> week

From the 2<sup>nd</sup> week onwards, try to raise your hands above your head until you feel a stretch or discomfort.



2<sup>nd</sup> week onwards

You may have a drain in place, which will limit your movement at first. Once this has been removed you can increase your range of movement.

### What if it hurts when I exercise?

You may feel some discomfort during and after these exercises, which is normal and will not be causing any damage. However, if you are experiencing prolonged pain, you may want to reduce the range or repetitions to a more manageable level.

### How long should I exercise for?

You should continue with all your **early** exercises until you have been reviewed by the physiotherapist at 3 weeks after surgery. You should not progress to advanced exercises unless you have been instructed to do so.

### When will my shoulder movement be back to normal?

Normal shoulder movement is usually regained within the first few weeks after surgery.

### Can I use my operated arm?

It is important to your recovery to gently use your arm and not to keep it still.

### What activities can I do?

It is safe to use your arm in normal light activities such as:

- Eating/drinking.
- Washing/dressing.

- Light housework like dusting and making/ preparing a light meal or snack.

### What activities should I not do?

You should avoid using either arm on the following tasks for 3 weeks or until you have been reviewed by a breast physiotherapist. This is to prevent delays in wound healing and other complications:

- Lifting heavy objects such as shopping bags, heavy pots/pans or carrying children.
- Repetitive movements such as ironing or vacuuming.
- Excessive reaching such as reaching for high shelves/pegging out washing.
- Pushing or pulling heavy items.

### What can help me to recover quickly following surgery?

- Walking and gentle exercise; 30 minutes, 5 times a week.
- Eating a healthy balanced diet.
- Stopping smoking.
- Support from family and friends.

### General points:

- **Changes to sensation**



If you have had any lymph nodes removed during surgery, it is normal to get some changes to sensation in the shaded area shown above. Changes to sensation include:

- Feeling numb
- Tingling sensations
- Feeling sore/sensitive
- Burning sensations
- Feeling swollen.

If symptoms occur, try to apply gentle pressure by wearing a deep sided bra; this will help to reduce swelling in the area. A long-sleeved, soft top may help prevent things rubbing under the arm; try not to hold your arm away from your body.

Symptoms may occur because the nerves that run through the armpit area have been disturbed during surgery. It can cause temporary bruising to the nerves. These symptoms usually disappear or improve within 3 months after surgery. Very occasionally changes to sensation may be permanent.

- **Cording**

You may experience discomfort or tightness, like a cord running from your armpit to your elbow and/or fingertips. This may feel like it restricts some of your arm function and movement.

This is called cording and sometimes occurs after lymph node surgery, due to the body producing scar tissue. The vessels can occasionally become 'stuck down' with the scar tissue. It is important to continue gently using your arm and stretching, which will help to free the vessels; this is not harmful.

## **When will I be able to return to work?**

This will depend on your job type and how well you recover. Your consultant or physiotherapist may be able to advise you.

## **When can I resume sexual activity?**

You can begin sexual activity whenever you feel comfortable. After breast surgery your operation area and arm may feel sore or uncomfortable for several weeks, so it is important to talk to your partner about this, so you feel comfortable.

## **When will I get further advice on returning to sport or hobbies?**

In the second part of this leaflet there is more advice. It is important that you have seen or spoken to your consultant or physiotherapist before progressing.

## **What if I'm feeling anxious, worried, or stressed?**

It is normal to feel this way before and after your treatment. You may find it beneficial to practice some relaxation techniques to help control these symptoms.

### **Mini relaxation exercise:**

- Stop what you are doing and close your eyes if you feel comfortable.
- Take a slow deep breath in through your nose.
- Think the word **relax**.
- Gently exhale by sighing out your mouth, continue to think **relax** as you do, imaging feelings of heaviness leaving your body.
- Repeat steps 2-4, 5 times.

- Hold the feeling of relaxation for 30 seconds.

You can find more relaxation exercises and advice through the Sherwood Forest Hospitals Clinical Psychology web pages: <https://www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk/our-services/clinical-psychology-cancer-service/>

## **Part 2 - advanced exercise and advice (3 weeks after your operation)**

**Only progress to these exercises if you have been advised to do so.**

### **Why is good posture important?**

Following surgery, you may have changed how you hold your body and how you use your arm. Often you will be unaware you are doing this, as it's your body's way of trying to look after the operated side.

While this may help for the first few days, after this time it actually slows down your recovery. Also scar tissue, as it is not being stretched out, will begin to tighten, and can cause pain and stiffness.

Continuing to protect the arm can also cause other long-term problems such as neck and back pain, as well as making activities difficult, like dressing.

### **How can I correct my posture?**

It's important to make sure you use your arm normally for activities, for example when you wash/dress or reach up.

Do it slowly at first to remind your body how to move properly. Ask family or friends to point out if you are not using your arm normally, holding it protectively or starting to slouch or change your posture.

When you sit, try putting a rolled-up towel at belt level behind your back and a pillow behind your head. This will encourage you to lean back, and sit in a good position, which also helps your scar become flexible.

### Looking after your scar

Scars mainly form over the first 2-3 months. It is important over this time to encourage them to be flexible enough to allow you to use your arm as you did before surgery.

One way of doing this is to do the regular exercises shown to you; another is to gently massage the scar.

### How should I massage my scar?

Once your wound has fully healed, has no scabs and no sign of infection (normally 2-3 weeks), you can start to massage it. Use a moisturiser such as E45, available from chemists or on prescription. Gently and lightly massage over your scar and chest area with small circular movements for about 5 minutes, once or twice a day, ideally after a bath or shower. This will also help to soften/flatten the scar and make it less sensitive.

### How long should I massage the scar?

Continue for a minimum of 3 months after your surgery, ideally 2 years as scars can change their shape and continue to tighten for several years.

The longer you do it for, the better the results will be both in terms of scar flexibility and how it looks cosmetically.

As your scar will be sensitive to sunlight for several years, a high factor sun cream is recommended.

## Advanced exercises, week 3 onwards

Do all the exercises to a gentle stretch. The stretch is helpful, not harmful, to the scar.

### How often do I have to do the exercises?

Try to do them **twice a day**. Build up to doing **10 of each exercise**.

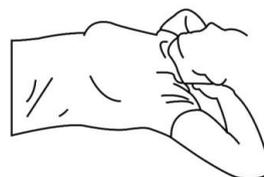
### What if it hurts when I exercise?

You may feel discomfort during and after exercising. This is normal and shows you are exercising correctly. If it is painful rather than uncomfortable, try fewer exercises but do them more often. If this doesn't help it could mean that your medication needs to be altered.

#### 1. Elbow push:

**This exercise is especially helpful if you go on to have radiotherapy, as treatment often needs you to be in this position.**

- Lie on your back.
- Hands behind head, elbows pointing to the ceiling.
- Gently push your elbows down to the pillow. Hold for a few seconds then bring your elbows back up.



#### 2. Trunk rotation:

- Lie on your back with your knees bent, then pull in your stomach muscles and roll.
- Roll your knees over to one side until you feel a stretch along the spine.

- Hold for 5 seconds and repeat to the other side.



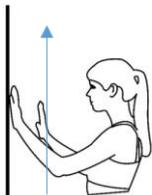
### 3. Assisted shoulder stretch:

- Lie on your back.
- Hold your hands together, elbows straight.
- Lift both arms up, keep them as close to your ears as possible.
- Hold for a few seconds.
- Slowly lower your arms back down.



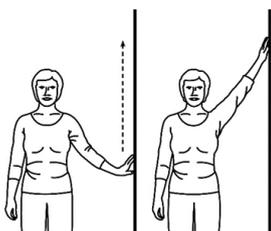
### 4. Walking up the wall – forwards:

- Facing a wall, slowly walk both hands up as far as you can.
- Hold for a few seconds then walk your hands back down.
- Mark or note a spot on the wall and try to get higher each time.



### 5. Walking up the wall – sideways:

- Stand sideways against a wall.
- Walk your hand up until you stand as close to the wall as possible.
- Hold for a few seconds then walk your hand back down.



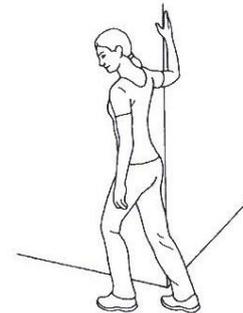
### 6. Back drying:

- With a towel/cloth, slowly use a gentle back drying movement.
- Reverse the position so your other arm is higher.



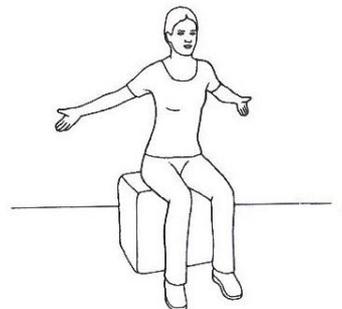
### 7. Pectoral stretch:

- Lift your shoulder up and place your forearm vertically against a wall.
- Gently lean forwards, stretching the front of your chest. Hold the stretch for 10 seconds.



### 8. Rhomboid squeezes:

- Sitting or standing in an upright posture, squeeze your shoulder blades back together and hold for 5 seconds.



## How long do I need to exercise for?

### If you do not have radiotherapy:

- Carry on all exercises as instructed for at least 3 months - longer if your arm movement is not back to normal.
- After 3 months and once your arm is back to normal, continue exercises 1, 3 and 6 once a day forever.

### Why?

Scars often continue to slowly tighten for several years after surgery. If not stretched regularly this can cause shoulder discomfort and stiffness at a later date.

### If you go on to have radiotherapy:

- Carry on all the exercises as instructed throughout your radiotherapy and for at least 3 months after you have finished your treatment - longer if your arm movement is not back to normal.
- After 3 months and once your arm is back to normal, continue exercises 1, 3 and 6 once a day forever.

### Why?

Radiotherapy can cause tissue tightness that can lead to shoulder discomfort and stiffness at a later date.

## Returning to activities

You need to slowly build up your activities, as your body needs time and energy to recover. Pace yourself - do a little more each day.

The following are guidelines only; you must listen to your body:

- **Housework**  
To allow the tissues to heal properly, leave heavy pulling/pushing/lifting with your operated arm for approximately the first 6 weeks after your surgery, for example heavy shopping, digging.

- **Sport and leisure**

Make sure your scar has fully healed before you start any of the following:

- Swimming - you can begin gently swimming at about 4-6 weeks (if you are having radiotherapy check with the radiographer).
- General physical sports/exercise classes - these can be commenced at 6-8 weeks.
- Gym work - you may start to lift gentle weights (1-2lb) with your operated arm at 6-8 weeks. Slowly increase the weight and repetitions.

## What are the benefits to continuing to exercise?

There is much evidence to show that simple activity can significantly help prevent cancer recurrence and also other long-term illnesses such as high blood pressure, heart disease, kidney disease, type-2 diabetes and stroke.

Cancer and its treatments can cause physical changes and dealing with these is often stressful. Being more physically active can help you cope with and recover from some of these changes.

Doctors used to advise people to rest as much as possible during treatment, but we now know that too much rest results in loss of muscle strength and leaves you with low energy levels.

Being active during and after treatment can:

- Reduce fatigue.
- Reduce stress and anxiety.
- Help look after your bones.
- Help look after your heart.
- Help reduce your risk of getting a blood clot.
- Help keep your weight healthy.
- Relieve pain.

During treatment, you will be the best judge of how much activity you can manage, whether that's trying to reduce the amount of time you spend resting or starting with going for a walk. Walking is an ideal exercise as it is free, you can do it whilst socialising and you can gradually increase the distance.

Regular physical activity can help ease pain in your joints by building your muscle strength, improving your flexibility and encouraging your body to release endorphins, which are the body's natural painkillers.

### **How much physical activity is recommended?**

In the UK adults are advised to do at least 2.5 hours of moderate intensity physical activity a week. This could be 30 minutes of activity on 5 days of the week, which could be broken up into 10 minutes of activity 3 times a day.

### **Eating a healthy diet**

A healthy diet contains a variety of foods, including fresh fruit and vegetables, starchy foods (such as rice, pasta and potatoes) and some protein-rich foods (such as meat, fish, eggs, lentils and beans).

A healthy diet is also low in fat (especially saturated fats), salt and sugar and limits alcohol consumption.

### **Stopping smoking**

By not smoking you immediately start to improve your circulation and breathing. This also benefits the heart and lungs.

❖ **Remember you may feel tired for a few months, especially if you start treatment such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy, so try not to set yourself enormous tasks.**

❖ **Generally you should be back to your normal level of activity in 3-6 months; again this may take longer if you need other treatments.**

### **Useful contacts:**

- **Amazon Breast Cancer Support Group**

Telephone: 01623 632213

- **Breast Cancer Now**

Helpline: 0808 8006000

Website: [www.breastcancernow.org.uk](http://www.breastcancernow.org.uk)

- **Maggie's Centre**

Telephone: 0115 924 6210

Email: [Nottingham@maggies.org](mailto:Nottingham@maggies.org)

Website:

[www.maggiescentres.org/our-centres/maggies-nottingham](http://www.maggiescentres.org/our-centres/maggies-nottingham)

- **Macmillan cancer support**

Helpline: 0808 8080000

Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

- **Lymphoedema support network**

Helpline: 020 73514480

Website: [www.lymphoedema.org/lsn](http://www.lymphoedema.org/lsn)

- **Smoke Free Life (Nottinghamshire)**

Telephone: 0800 2465343 / 0115 7722515

Text QUIT: 66777

Website:

[www.smokefreelifenottinghamshire.co.uk](http://www.smokefreelifenottinghamshire.co.uk)

### **Further sources of information**

NHS Choices: [www.nhs.uk/conditions](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions)

Our website: [www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk](http://www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk)

### **Patient Experience Team (PET)**

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service.

**King's Mill Hospital:** 01623 672222

**Newark Hospital:** 01636 685692

**Email:** [sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net](mailto:sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net)

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email [sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net](mailto:sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net).

This document is intended for information purposes only and should not replace advice that your relevant health professional would give you.

External websites may be referred to in specific cases. Any external websites are provided for your information and convenience. We cannot accept responsibility for the information found on them.

If you require a full list of references for this leaflet (if relevant) please email [sfh-tr.patientinformation@nhs.net](mailto:sfh-tr.patientinformation@nhs.net) or telephone 01623 622515, extension 6927.

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