

# Post-Operative Activity Guidelines and Exercises

This information sheet will review precautions following surgery, range of motion exercises, deep breathing techniques, scar massage and the benefits of exercise.

Following surgery, it is important to pace yourself. Post-operatively, fatigue is normal. It is also normal to experience some discomfort and pain. You can begin to use the affected arm for light activities and exercises, following the guidelines listed below. Stretches, diaphragmatic breathing, and relaxation techniques can all help to manage pain, and gradually help you to return to your prior level of function.

## For everyone:

- Your health care provider will discuss with you recommendations for when to resume showering. You should not take a bath until you are completely healed after surgery.
- Self-care activities such as washing your face and brushing your teeth using your surgical side arm are okay. Light housekeeping and meal preparation are also okay.
- Avoid heavy lifting on the surgical side for 4 weeks after surgery. Always return to lifting *gradually* after this period. Your surgeon may suggest a longer time frame for avoiding lifting.
- Be mindful of your shoulder on the surgical side. It is very important to keep it loose and moving within the limits you are given after surgery. If you don't use it, you lose it!

## If you have a *lumpectomy* or *partial mastectomy* with or without a *sentinel lymph node biopsy*:

- Avoid any activity that bounces or jostles the breast for two weeks after surgery (i.e.: running, jumping, using the elliptical machine).
- Perform shoulder range of motion as tolerated, beginning 1-2 days after surgery.

## If you have an *axillary node dissection*:

- You may want to use pillows to elevate your arm at night to decrease swelling during the first week. Putting a pillow between your arm and your side at night will prevent you from rolling on to the surgical site.
- You should avoid repetitive motions with the arm on the surgical side, such as vacuuming, for two weeks after surgery. Avoid heavy lifting for 4 weeks.
- See [Axillary Lymph Node Surgery](#) information sheet for more recommendations.

## If you have a *mastectomy* without reconstruction:

- Perform shoulder range of motion as tolerated, even while the drains are in.
- You may return to low-impact exercises after surgery once your pain is controlled and you feel comfortable.

## If you have *breast reconstruction*:

- You should not lift your arm above shoulder level until cleared by your plastic surgeon.
- You may return to low-impact exercises four weeks after surgery.
- See the information sheet entitled "Activity After Breast Reconstruction" for more tips.

**Walking** is a great exercise to begin immediately to reduce bone loss, counter fatigue and nausea, and prevent muscle atrophy. After surgery, try to walk around for a few minutes 2-3 times per day.

# Post-Operative Activity Guidelines and Exercises (continued)

## Exercises to Maximize Your Shoulder Range of Motion

The following exercises should be started 1-2 days after any breast surgery, but are especially important after a mastectomy. They should be performed 2-3 times per day, 5-10 repetitions each. They are designed to improve the movement of the arm and shoulders. They should be done slowly and rhythmically. They may be performed in a sitting position.

**Note: If you've had a mastectomy with reconstruction, do not lift your arm past shoulder level while the drains are in. You may perform these exercises within those limits.**

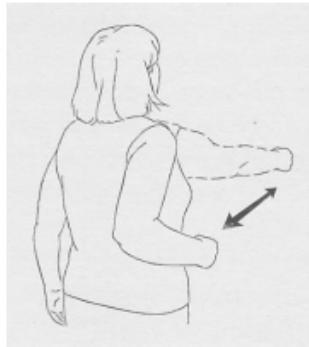
### Shoulder Rolls

Inhale and bring shoulders up, back, then exhale and relax shoulders down.



### Arm Saw

With elbow bent at 90°, pull backward to bend elbow more, then move arm forward, straightening elbow.



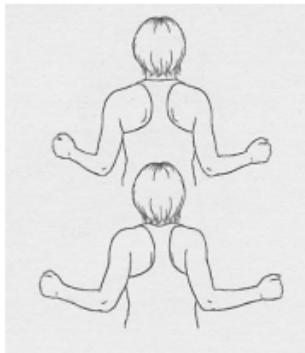
### Shoulder Walk Up Exercises

With elbow straight, use fingers to "crawl" up wall until you feel a gentle stretch.



### Shoulder Rotation

With elbows bent to 90°, pinch shoulder blades together and rotate arms out, keeping elbows bent.



### Back Scratch

Reach behind back and hold hands together. Gently slide hands up back and slowly return to starting position.



AFTER TISSUE EXPANDER PLACEMENT,  
DO NOT TRY THIS EXERCISE UNTIL  
CLEARED BY YOUR PLASTIC SURGEON.

### Butterfly Exercise

Place hands behind head and gently bring elbows back.



AFTER RECONSTRUCTION, KEEP ELBOWS  
BELOW SHOULDER LEVEL UNTIL DRAINS  
ARE REMOVED.

# Post-Operative Activity Guidelines and Exercises (continued)

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## Diaphragmatic Breathing:

Deep breathing exercises are important for pain control, relaxation and to relieve tightness in the chest wall and back. Practice deep breathing using your diaphragm, at least 5 times a day. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down on your back. Take a slow, deep breath through your nose to expand your chest and abdomen. Hold for 2 seconds. Then exhale slowly. Repeat this 4-5 times.



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## Scar Massage:

It is not unusual for scar tissues from incisions to get tight and inflexible. You can help decrease the binding or tightening of scars by moving the tissue and massaging the area. Four weeks after the incision heals, begin self-massage. Use a body lotion to soften the scar. Start the massage with gentle strokes. Stroke in the direction of the scar and then across the scar. Try to massage for the length of one song, three times a day.

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## Benefits of Exercise:

- Reduce weight gain associated with many drug and hormonal cancer treatments.
- Increase energy level, alertness, and mood.
- Minimize the side effects of cancer treatments, such as fatigue, nausea, and decreased aerobic fitness.
- Several observational studies have identified the potential for exercise to prevent second cancer among survivors.

**Check with your surgeon regarding a return to cardiovascular exercises following surgery.**

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For **lymphedema** precautions and activity guidelines related to **lymph node surgery**, please see

**Axillary Lymph Node Surgery and Lymphedema Fact Sheets.**