

After mastectomy and/or axillary surgery

Surgery department



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Arm exercises

After your operation your arm and shoulder may feel very stiff and sore. To regain full use and flexibility, it is important to do some arm exercises. These will not damage the wound or break the stitches. A certain amount of discomfort is to be expected after your surgery but if you are unable to use your arm because it is too painful, you should ask the ward nurses for some pain relief tablets. These can be taken on a regular basis until you feel more comfortable.

Exercises should be started a day or two after your operation and continued for at least two weeks or until full movement is achieved (and at any time after if the arm becomes stiff). During the first week you should avoid raising the affected arm above shoulder level.

Each exercise should be done three to five times to start with, increasing gradually to a maximum of ten. It is better to do them little and often (for a few minutes three to four times a day) rather than long sessions. The idea is to progress gently and not to be too vigorous and overstrain yourself.

The exercises are outlined below. Your breast care nurse will be happy to demonstrate them to you before you start.

1. Place hands on shoulders – elbows at side. Lift elbows out from side as far as possible and circle them gently, forwards and then backwards.
2. Keeping your head up straight, raise your arm with your elbow away from your side and pretend you are brushing your hair from front to back.
3. Place hands behind back. Starting at small of back, slowly reach upwards to just under your shoulder blades.
4. Cross your arms, putting the hand of your unaffected arm under the elbow of your affected arm. Lift your arm to shoulder level or higher if you can and then slowly lower.
5. Clasp hands together and keep your elbows straight. Slowly raise hands above head as far as possible and then lower them slowly. This can also be done while lying down with a pillow to support your head and shoulders.

6. Stand facing a wall and with your hands at shoulder level. Gradually walk fingers as high as possible up the wall, stretching a little further each day. Slide your hands back to shoulder level before repeating the exercise.

The dos of hand and arm care

1. **DO** try to use your arm as normally as possible, although vacuuming, ironing and hanging out washing should be avoided during the first two weeks. These tasks can then be introduced gradually.
2. **DO** elevate your arm on a pillow or cushions whenever possible ie. in the evenings and at night in bed, particularly if it is aching, as you will find this helpful.
3. **DO** drive a car as soon as you are comfortable, but start off with short journeys (particularly if you do not have power steering). Remember, you are NOT seat belt exempt.
4. **DO** wear rubber gloves for washing-up and doing dirty jobs around the house, particularly when using hard detergents or steel wool.
4. **DO** wear strong gloves for gardening.
5. **DO** wear a thimble when sewing.
6. **DO** use an electric razor or depilatory cream for removing unwanted hair.

The don'ts of hand and arm care

1. **DON'T** carry heavy weights such as cases or shopping bags on the affected arm. Wear your shoulder bag on the opposite side.
2. **DON'T** get your arm sunburnt.
3. **DON'T** get bitten by insects. Try to avoid this by using a repellent.
4. **DON'T** have really hot baths and saunas.
5. **DON'T** allow anyone to take blood or insert a venflon (for intravenous drip) into the affected arm.
6. **DON'T** allow anyone to give you an injection into the affected arm, particularly vaccinations against flu and diseases.
7. **DON'T** have your blood pressure recorded on that arm.

Lymphoedema

A small proportion of women will develop a swelling of the arm known as lymphoedema. It can occur after surgery or radiotherapy to the lymph glands and is caused by damage to the lymphatic system which is responsible for draining fluid from the tissues. By removing a number of glands, the draining system from the arm can be affected. For example, giving injections or taking blood from the affected side has a risk of introducing infection. This could result in the remaining glands not working efficiently to fight the infection, resulting in a swollen arm.

Lymphoedema does not necessarily occur straight after treatment and can happen at any time, even years later. However, if you follow some simple advice, you may be able to avoid this problem. It is important to contact the breast care nurses if you think your arm is becoming swollen.

General hand, arm and skin care

- Always wash skin gently, and avoid harsh soaps.
- Dry the skin thoroughly, especially in-between fingers.
- Use a moisturiser daily. A bland cream such as E45 or Aqueous cream is ideal.
- Take care when cutting nails, preferably use clippers.
- Be aware of inflamed or broken areas, cuts or grazes that could give rise to infection and treat promptly with antiseptic cream. If there is no improvement and there is redness, swelling and warmth, then contact your GP.
- If a fungal infection develops, treat with anti fungal cream.

Wound healing

Following breast cancer surgery there is no wound dressing or external stitches in the breast wound. The skin edges are held together with Dermabond adhesive. This is clear glue that will gradually wear off after five to ten days. You can gently bathe or shower during this time but should not soak the wound or expose it to prolonged wetness. A clear waterproof dressing is applied to protect the drain site/s. You can bath or shower with the drain dressing in place. Avoid highly perfumed soap or bubble bath. After bathing, gently pat the wound area dry with

a clean towel. If the wound extends into the underarm area or you have a separate wound in your armpit, you should avoid deodorant until the area is well healed.

Once the wound is healed and comfortable, you can gently massage in some E45 cream or vitamin E oil to keep the skin supple. Your breast care nurse will advise you on who to contact if you are having problems with your wound.

After discharge

You will remain under the care of the breast care team so please do not hesitate to telephone the breast care nurses if you have any concerns during your recovery. If necessary, they will liaise with your GP or district/practice nurses regarding your care.

Help yourself to recover

Try to think positively - it can aid healing.

Try to reduce stress factors in your life if possible.

Eat a healthy diet to aid the healing process.

Resume your normal lifestyle as soon as you can. Don't become a recluse.

Try to make time to do things you enjoy.

Make some plans for the future - a special trip, visiting family or friends or a holiday. Consciously try to look forward to the good things in life.

Don't compare yourself with other women. Remember - you are unique!

If you have had a mastectomy, your breast care nurse will give you an appointment for approximately five weeks after your operation for the fitting of your permanent prosthesis. Please bring a thin-knit cardigan/sweater or 'T' shirt with you. However, should you require radiotherapy at either Bristol, Poole or elsewhere and have not already been fitted, please telephone

the breast care nurses on completion of treatment so that an appointment can be sent to you.

Breast reconstruction

If at any stage you would like to know more about breast reconstruction, please ask the breast care nurses for more information.

Please use this space for any notes or questions you have

If you would like this leaflet in another format or in a different language, please ask a member of staff.

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