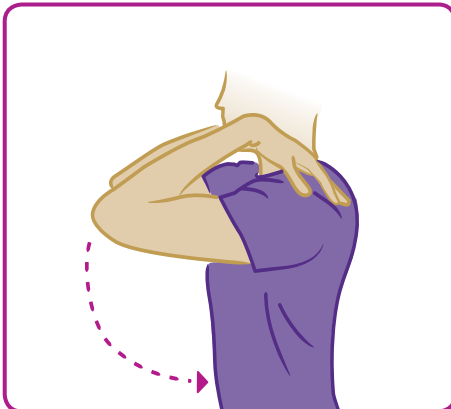
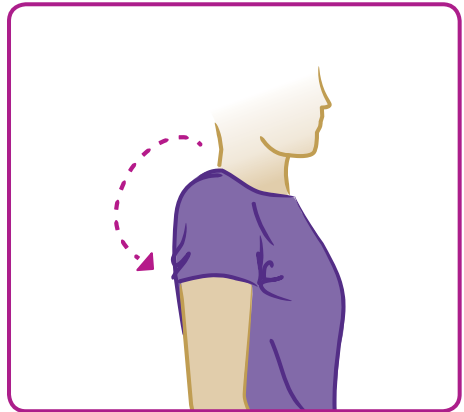


Exercises after breast cancer surgery



Breast Cancer Care is here for anyone affected by breast cancer. We bring people together, provide information and support, and campaign for improved standards of care. We use our understanding of people's experience of breast cancer and our clinical expertise in everything we do.

Visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk or call our free Helpline on **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay **18001**).

Why do the exercises?

These exercises aim to help you regain arm and shoulder movement after surgery for breast cancer.

They have been devised 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.

The exercises in this leaflet can help:

- get back the range of movement and function you had before surgery
- improve symptoms of tight scars and cording – when you feel as if you have a tight cord running from the armpit to your elbow in your affected arm, or sometimes down the whole length of the arm
- prevent long-term problems with arm and shoulder movement, posture and stiffness
- reduce the risk of lymphoedema – swelling caused by a build-up of lymph fluid.

If you're worried about any of these, or have symptoms of cording, speak to your breast care nurse.

If you've had breast reconstruction

If you've recently had a breast reconstruction, talk to the surgeon who did the operation or your physiotherapist before you start or continue with any exercises, and follow their advice.

When should I start the exercises?

Start the exercises as soon as you can, ideally the day after your surgery.

In the first week after your surgery, you can start the warm-up and basic exercises.

In the second week, you can do the more advanced exercises as well (if you have removable stitches or a drain, wait until these have been removed).

These timings are meant as a guideline only. Complete the exercises at your own pace.

How much exercise should I do?

You should do the exercises every day.

Do each exercise 5 times before you move on to the next one.

Try to do the exercises 3 times a day – in the morning, around midday and in the evening.

Don't worry if you can't manage to do all the exercises every time. For example, during radiotherapy you may find the exercises more difficult.

Do as much as you feel able to at a pace you're comfortable with.

How hard are the exercises?

The more you do the exercises, the easier they should become.

You shouldn't feel pain when doing the exercises. However, a stretching or pulling sensation is normal.

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.

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

How long should I do the exercises for?

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

Arm stiffness or weakness can occur long after surgery and following radiotherapy.

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

If you've had radiotherapy, it's a good idea to do the exercises for as long as you're still experiencing tightness and stiffness, and you may want to continue doing them after this.

Talk to your breast care nurse or physiotherapist if you're not sure how long to keep up the exercise programme or if you have any concerns about your recovery after surgery.

Reasons to stop exercising

Stop doing the exercises and speak to your surgeon or breast care nurse if you have:

- a seroma (a collection of fluid under the arm or in the breast or chest wall)
- wound infection or healing problems
- prolonged pain or pain that gets worse.

It's important to start the exercises again once these issues have been resolved and your surgeon or breast care nurse says it's safe to do so.

For more information about recovery after surgery for breast cancer, see our booklet **Your operation and recovery**. To order or download a copy visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk

First week after surgery

Do the warm-up, basic exercises and cool-down.

Second week and beyond

Do the warm-up, basic and more advanced exercises, and cool-down.

These timings are meant as a guide, and you should complete the exercises at your own pace.

- You can start the exercises the day after your surgery.
- Do each exercise **5 times** before you move on to the next one.
- Try to do the exercises **3 times** a day – in the morning, around midday and in the evening.

If you've had a breast reconstruction, talk to your surgeon or physiotherapist before you start or continue any exercises and follow their advice.

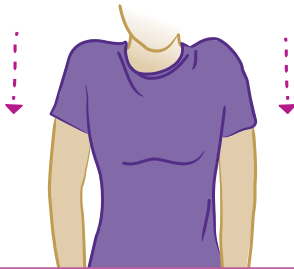
You shouldn't feel pain when doing the exercises. However, a stretching or pulling sensation is normal. If you have any concerns about your range of movement or level of discomfort while doing these exercises, speak to your surgeon, breast care nurse or physiotherapist.

Warm-up and cool-down

Do exercises 1 and 2 to warm up before you do any other exercises on this leaflet. Repeat them at the end to cool down. You can do them standing up or sitting down.

1

Shoulder shrugs

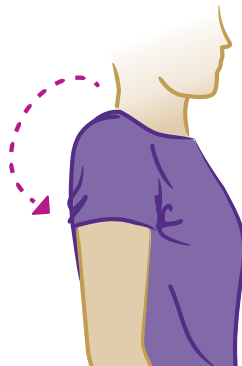


- Keep your arms loose and relaxed by your sides.
- Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears and lower gently back down.

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

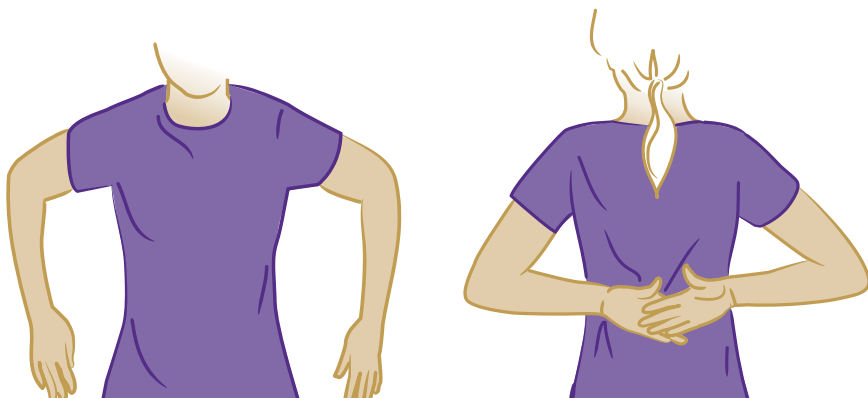
Basic exercises can be done in the first week after surgery. You can do them sitting down or standing up. Remember to warm up first.

In these exercises, **do not** raise your arms above shoulder level (90 degrees).

3

Back scratching

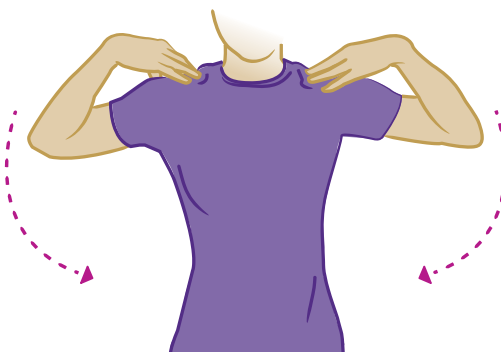
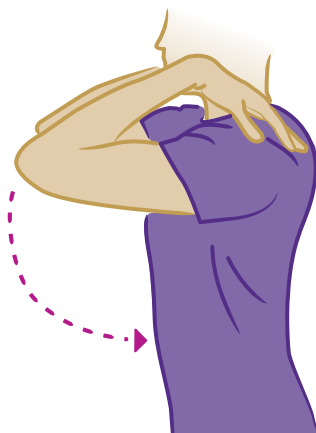
- Hold your arms out to the sides and bend your arms from the elbow.
- Slowly reach up behind your back to just under your shoulder blades.



4

Bent arm

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



Alternative

- Rest your hands on your shoulders but take your elbows out to the sides.
- Lower your elbows slowly, then raise them again.

5

Winging it

- Place your hands behind your head with your elbows together in front of your face.
- Bring your elbows back so they're pointing out to the sides, then return to the starting position.



More advanced exercises

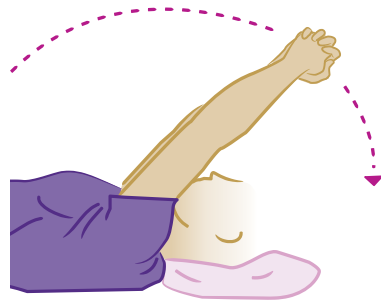
You can start these more advanced exercises in the second week after surgery (if you have removable stitches or a drain, wait until these have been removed). In these exercises, you **should** raise your arms above shoulder level.

Remember to do the warm-up and basic exercises first each time. If you're having problems with fluid collecting at your operation site, wound infection or prolonged or worsening pain, stop exercising and speak to your surgeon or breast care nurse.

6

Arm lifts

- Before you start, while lying down take three or four really deep breaths and concentrate on relaxing your shoulders so they are not hunched up towards your ears.
- Lie on the bed or floor with a cushion or pillow to support your head.
- Clasp your hands together or hold onto a stick or broom handle. Keeping your elbows straight, 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.

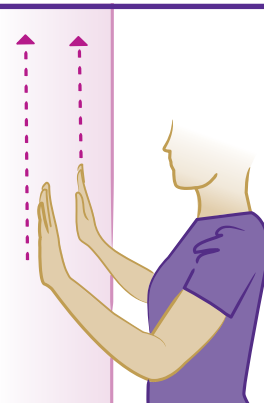
Alternative

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.

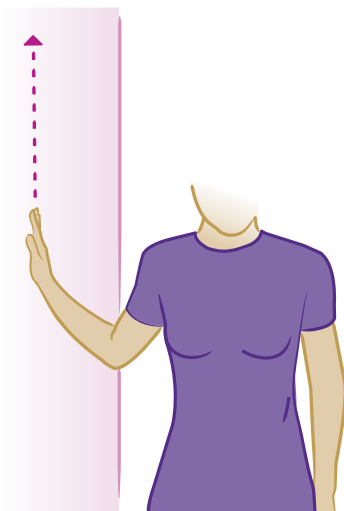
7

Wall climbing

- 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 – as far as you can, feeling 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.



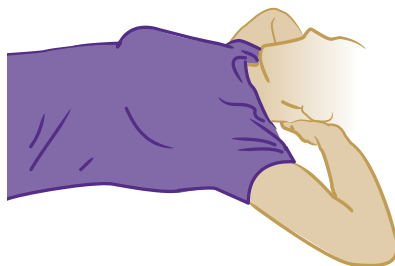
Alternative

- Stand sideways with your affected side nearest the wall.
- Put your hand on the wall, keeping your elbow bent.
- Looking straight ahead, 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.

8

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.



This exercise is particularly helpful if you go on to have radiotherapy as the treatment will often require you to be in a similar position.

To order our **Eat well, keep active after breast cancer** DVD which contains a general fitness work-out suitable for anyone 12 weeks after surgery, visit our website www.breastcancercare.org.uk or call our Helpline on **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay 18001).



This leaflet can be downloaded from our website, www.breastcancercare.org.uk where you can also find the titles we produce as e-books. Publications are available in large print, Braille, audio CD or DAISY format by request on **0845 092 0808**.

This leaflet has been produced by Breast Cancer Care's clinical specialists and reviewed by healthcare professionals and people affected by breast cancer. If you would like a list of the sources we used to research this publication, email publications@breastcancercare.org.uk or call **0845 092 0808**.

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