

Physiotherapy advice following Breast Surgery

Introduction

This leaflet aims to provide you with some advice about recovering from breast surgery and returning to your normal daily activities. It is also a guide to explain the exercises, identify things to be aware of and general advice about your recovery.

Physiotherapy following breast surgery

Following your breast surgery, you may experience discomfort in your chest wall, armpit, neck, shoulders and into your upper back. You may notice increased swelling or tightness in the arm and into the armpit.

Healing following breast surgery can vary from individual and it is not uncommon to experience some discomfort with movement and also an increase in scar tissue or tightness. Additional treatments such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy may cause the soft tissues to become fibrous or a build-up of scar tissue that may restrict your movement, or you may have a pre-existing shoulder problem prior to surgery that becomes exacerbated.

Why do I need to exercise?

It is important to follow the exercise plan provided by the Macmillan Breast Specialist Nurses because:

- It will help to prevent shoulder stiffness, to improve range of movement and shoulder function
- It will also help to encourage circulation which is also beneficial for tissue healing.
- Exercise can also help to relieve tightness and cording.
- Reduces the risk of lymphoedema
- To be able to maintain the range required for further treatment such as radiotherapy

How much should I do?

You should aim to carry out the exercises every day. Aim to perform each exercise 5 times before moving on to the next exercise. If this is too difficult, then perform as many repetitions as comfortable and increase as you are able.

When doing the exercises, you may feel a slight stretch or pulling sensation. This is perfectly normal; however, you should stop any of the exercises if you experience any pain.

Ensure that you perform the warmup and cool down exercises during each session

How long do I need to do the exercises for?

It is not uncommon to experience arm stiffness or weakness for several weeks following surgery and this may continue following chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy. It is important to ensure that you monitor your range of movement, stiffness and tightness of the scar tissue periodically in the months following completion of surgery and treatment to ensure that these are maintained and to reduce the risk of secondary complications such as a frozen shoulder and shoulder tendinopathies.

When should I stop doing the exercises?

Stop exercising and speak to your doctor, ERAS Nurse or Macmillan Breast Specialist Nurse if you have:

- A seroma (a collection of fluid under the arm, in the breast, or chest wall)
- A wound infection or healing issues
- Worsening pain

Remember some swelling is a normal reaction to surgery and a natural stage of how your body heals. However, if you are concerned, please do contact your Macmillan Breast Specialist Nurse.

It is important to restart the exercises again as soon as possible, however, please follow the advice of your health care professional.

Resuming normal activities and return to exercise

Take gentle exercise, such as walking, immediately following your surgery.

This can help to maintain strength and fitness, reduce tiredness, and also aid recovery. It can also help to minimise potential side effects during chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

Please contact your physiotherapist on **0300 131 4770** if you require guidance, or specific advice, about planning or commencing any form of physical activity.

Swimming

Swimming is a great form of exercise; recently the advice on whether you can continue to swim during your treatment, specifically radiotherapy, has been updated.

You should now be able to continue to swim during radiotherapy, however, please speak to your health care professional for individual advice as required, and please do not swim until your scars are fully healed.

With regards to swimming during chemotherapy, it is important to check with your oncologist prior to embarking on any swim activity as this may increase your risk of infection. This is because chemotherapy affects your immune system, and your body is less able to fight infection. This means you may be more susceptible to any germs in the water.

Remember to pace your return to sports/exercise and set yourself achievable and realistic targets

Pilates and Yoga

These are excellent forms of activity following breast surgery. We recommend a gradual return to Pilates and Yoga; however you should not attempt any Pilates or Yoga positions where you have to weight bear through your arms until you are approximately six weeks following your surgery.

After this time, you should return to these activities gradually and do not hold any static positions through your arms for longer than 10seconds without a rest.

Four - six weeks after surgery

Four to six weeks after surgery you can begin to return to higher impact activity/exercise. Please contact your physiotherapist if you require guidance or specific advice

Eight weeks after surgery

Eight weeks after your surgery you should have resumed normal levels of activity. We recommend 30mins a day of moderate intensity activity. This can be increased to no more than 150mins a week as your endurance/ability increases. Remember to plan, pace and prioritise your activity and try to include a variety of activities to perform.

During moderate intensity exercise your heart rate and breathing rate should increase, and you might break a sweat, but you should still be able hold a conversation. To measure your breathing rate, imagine a scale of 0–10 where 0 is you breathing normally at rest and 10 is extreme breathlessness. Aim to reach 4/10 breathlessness, and this will equal achieving a moderate intensity of physical activity.

Things to consider

Cording

Your exercises can help to reduce the risk of, and treat, cording.

You may notice some tight bands/cords that develop under your armpit, sometimes stretching down to your wrist. This is known as cording, but it is nothing to be concerned about. Some people develop cording and others do not. Exercise will help relieve these cords, so it is important to continue with your exercise programme if cording develops.

If you develop any cording and you have not been referred to see the physiotherapist, please contact your MacMillan Breast Specialist Nurse or ERAS Nurse Specialist for an urgent referral. If you are already under the physiotherapy team, please contact your physiotherapist on **0300 131 4770** to make an urgent appointment.

Seroma

If you experience a seroma (pocket of swelling following surgery) please be guided by your health care professional regarding your exercise plan and contact your MacMillan Breast Specialist Nurse if you have any further concerns.

Massage

Self-massage can help with the recovery of your scars. Once your scars have fully healed, it is recommended to perform daily massage around your scars. When you feel ready, using your fingers, or the palm of your hand, press down gently on the tissue surrounding your scar and move the top layer of skin on the underlying layers in a circular motion. This will assist in softening the scar, by improving circulation to the area, and might also help to improve sensation.

Providing your scars have fully healed, you can continue to use your favourite creams to massage the area. However, during, and for approximately four weeks following, radiotherapy you will be advised on which creams/ moisturiser to use on your skin

Lifting and carrying

Avoid heavy lifting and carrying, especially above shoulder height, for the first two to three weeks following your operation, or until your scars have healed. You can then gradually return to normal activities once you feel ready.

Repetitive tasks

Take care with repetitive tasks such as sewing, typing, writing, dusting, vacuuming for the first two to three weeks following surgery, as they may increase swelling, or induce achiness or heaviness in the affected arm(s). Return to these activities gradually and ensure that you pace yourself with regular breaks.

Driving

We recommend you do not drive until you feel confident that the seat belt sits comfortably across your chest wall, you can safely and confidently handle the gear stick/handbrake, and if in an emergency you had to perform an emergency stop that this would not cause you any harm or discomfort. You should check with your insurance company to make sure you are covered to start driving again as they may refuse to meet a claim if they feel you have driven too soon.

Please do not drive for 48 hours after your anaesthetic/ operation and if you are taking painkillers, please check with a pharmacist whether it is safe for you to drive. If you are not sure about when to resume driving, please visit your GP to check your progress.

Returning to work

When you return to work, it will depend on what your job involves. A graded return to work is recommended but not essential and should commence when you feel both physically and emotionally ready. Please ask a healthcare professional if you require any further information, advice or support.

Please check with your employer which sickness note they require. It is usually okay to self-certificate for up to seven days but if you are off work for a longer period you will need to see your GP for a certificate. We cannot supply certificates.

Will I need more physiotherapy?

You may require further physiotherapy if:

- you have not regained full movement at your shoulder three to four weeks after your operation
- a shoulder restriction is causing you problems in your daily activities
- you have cording
- you are unable to reach the radiotherapy position
- you are having difficulty returning to your normal levels of physical activity

Consent

Although you consent for this treatment, you may at any time after that withdraw such consent. Please discuss this with your medical team.

Sources of information

This information leaflet has been developed in conjunction with the Breast Cancer Care, NICE Guideline NG080 Early and locally advanced breast cancer: diagnosis and treatment and Guy's and St Thomas' Physiotherapy Department Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust.

Important information

The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

Your comments

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the Patient Experience Team – Tel: 0300 131 4731 (direct dial) or by email at: esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net

Hand hygiene

The Trust is committed to maintaining a clean, safe environment. Hand hygiene is very important in controlling infection. Alcohol gel is widely available at the patient bedside for staff use and at the entrance of each clinical area for visitors to clean their hands before and after entering.

Other formats

If you require any of the Trust leaflets in alternative formats, such as large print or alternative languages, please contact the Equality and Human Rights Department.

Tel: 0300 131 4434 Email: esh-tr.AccessibleInformation@nhs.net

After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

Reference

The following clinicians have been consulted and agreed this patient information:
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The following clinicians have been consulted and agreed this patient information
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The directorate group that have agreed this patient information leaflet:
Diagnostic, Anaesthetic & Surgery Division
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