

Getting fitter, feeling stronger

Exercises to help recovery after breast cancer surgery



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The exercise programme outlined here aims to help you regain arm and shoulder movement after surgery for breast cancer. It is a structured routine designed specially for breast cancer patients with the help of breast surgeons, breast care nurses and physiotherapists.

The programme is suitable for all patients who have had a lumpectomy, mastectomy, lymph node removal and/or radiotherapy. If you have had surgery on both sides at the same time (bilateral), you may want to repeat the exercises with each arm.

If you have 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.

A DVD version of this exercise programme is also available. It contains more exercises as well as a general fitness workout for those who are 12 weeks post-surgery. To order a copy of the **Getting fitter, feeling stronger** DVD, visit our website or call our helpline on **0808 800 6000** (Text Relay **18001**).

Why exercise?

Regular exercise will have a positive impact on your wellbeing. It will help to:

- increase your range of movement
- improve any symptoms of cording (which is when you feel as though you have a tight cord in your affected arm running from your armpit down to your elbow, or sometimes down the whole length of the arm)
- prevent any long-term problems with arm and shoulder movement and stiffness, as well as problems with your posture
- reduce the risk of lymphoedema (swelling caused by a build-up of lymph fluid) by encouraging the lymphatic system to work more effectively. If you have developed lymphoedema, or if you want to find out more, see the Breast Cancer Care factsheet **Reducing the risk of lymphoedema** or the booklet **Living with lymphoedema after breast cancer**.

Before doing any of these exercises, you should check that they are appropriate for you with your surgeon, breast care nurse or physiotherapist. This is particularly important if you have had any kind of breast reconstruction procedure, as this often means healing and recovery take longer. Speak to the surgeon who did your operation and they will be able to advise you. If you have any ongoing concerns about pain or stiffness in your arm or shoulder, you may want to ask your breast specialist or GP (local doctor) to refer you to a physiotherapist.

When should I start exercising?

You should ideally start this programme on the second day after your surgery and the exercises need to be completed every day. The exercises are grouped into sections according to your stage of recovery. There are exercises for the first seven days after surgery, then a section to follow from weeks two to six after surgery, and finally exercises that are suitable for people who are seven weeks after surgery and beyond.

The number of weeks that this programme says it should take you to reach each stage is intended as a guide. People will progress at different speeds and you should move on to the different stages at your own pace.

How much exercise should I do?

The warm-up and basic exercises sections should be completed by everybody every time you do the exercise programme. If you have had surgery within the past seven days, you only need to complete these sections and you should aim to repeat them three times a day. The warm-up should be done before you start the other exercise sections and repeated at the end of your session, as a cool down.

It's best to exercise little and often after surgery for breast cancer. Follow the programme advised for your stage of recovery, but break it down into manageable

chunks so that you're exercising for five to ten minutes each time and for around 30 minutes in total each day. However, don't worry if you can't always manage this. For example, during radiotherapy you may find the exercises more difficult. Do as much as you feel able at a pace you feel comfortable with.

How hard are the exercises?

The exercises may seem daunting at first, but the more you do them the easier they will become. When you are completing the exercises you should not be feeling pain; however, a stretching and pulling sensation is normal. It's important that you always complete the cool down at the end of each exercise session to help avoid injury and prevent stiffness. If at any stage you become concerned about your range of movement or level of discomfort, report this to your breast care nurse or physiotherapist.

How long should I keep up the exercises?

Muscles seize up very quickly if they are not used, so it is important to carry on with these exercises as part of your daily routine. Arm stiffness or weakness can occur long after surgery and following radiotherapy. Stiffness can also recur years later. You should certainly keep exercising until you have close to the full range of movement that you had before your surgery. Again, talk to your breast care nurse or a physiotherapist if you are not sure how long to keep up the exercise programme.

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These exercises will help you regain movement and strength in your arm and shoulder after surgery for breast cancer. They are grouped into sections depending on your stage of recovery. Follow the sections according to the number of weeks since your surgery.

For the first seven days after surgery you need to do the warm-up followed by the basic exercises. From weeks 2-6, the warm-up should be the first exercise you complete then move on to the basic exercises and follow them with the intermediate exercises. You should always repeat the cool down at the end. By week 7 you should be completing the warm-up followed by the basic, intermediate and advanced sections and doing the cool down again at the end.

The exercises can be done in a standing position with a straight back and your feet shoulder-width apart or from a sitting position – again with your back straight. Read the information for each exercise before you start. If at any time you become concerned about your range of movement or level of discomfort, speak to your surgeon or breast care nurse.



KEY

This symbol means that once you are seven weeks after surgery these exercises can be made more advanced by doing the same movement using a small hand weight (max 1.5kg) or full 500ml water bottle.

Warm-up / cool down

1



Keeping your arms loose and relaxed by your sides, shrug your shoulders up towards your ears and release gently back down again. **Repeat 7 times.**

Basic exercises (week 1)

2

Hold your hands together with your arms straight and bring them steadily up in front of you – to about 90 degrees (shoulder height) – and back down again. **Repeat 7 times.**



3

Put your hands on your shoulders and steadily bring your elbows forwards and up in front of you to about 90 degrees, and back down again. **Repeat 7 times.**



Intermediate exercises (weeks 2-6)

4



Put your hands on your shoulders with your elbows pointing out to your sides. Bring your elbows up to 90 degrees. **Repeat 7 times.**

5



Place your hands behind your head with your elbows pointing out to the sides. Bring your elbows together in front of your face. **Repeat 7 times.**

6

Stand side-on to a wall and place the palm of the hand on your affected arm flat against the wall at shoulder height. Walk your hand gently up the wall, stepping in as you reach higher. Hold for about 20 seconds. **Repeat 10 times.**

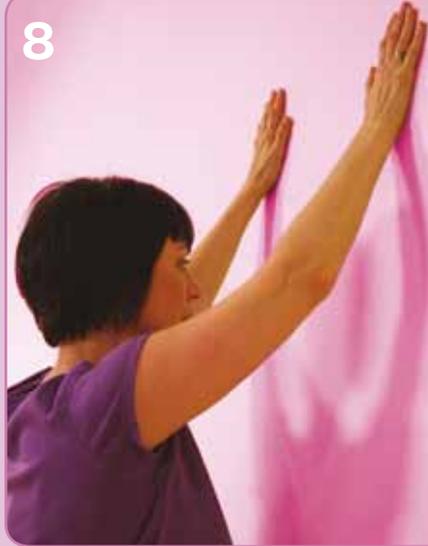


7

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8



9

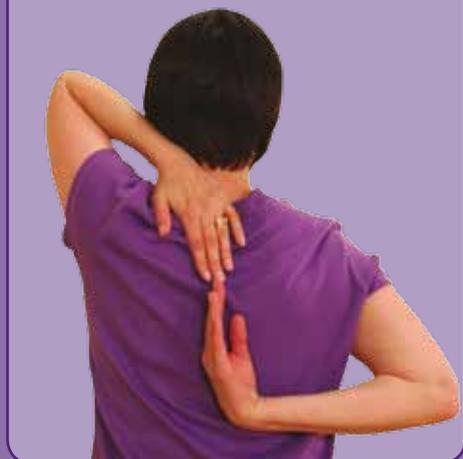


Hold your hands together with your arms straight and take them up in front of your body above 90 degrees and as high as you can manage aiming to reach straight above your head.

Repeat 10 times.

Advanced exercises (week 7 onwards)

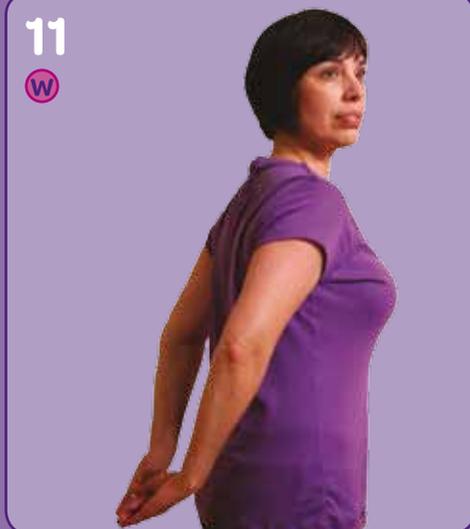
10



Take your right hand behind your back and the left hand over your shoulder. Aim to touch hands. Swap so the left hand is behind your back and your right hand over your shoulder. **Alternate your arms for 10 reaches.**

11

W



Link your hands behind your back and, keeping your arms quite straight, lift them up and away from your body then release gently back down. **Repeat 10 times.**

12

Hold a weight in the hand of your affected arm and, keeping your arm straight, slowly raise your arm out to the side to around shoulder height and lower back down. **Repeat 10 times.**



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**).**

Calls may be monitored for training purposes. Confidentiality is maintained between callers and Breast Cancer Care. Interpreters are available in any language.



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