

Exercises After Breast or Axillary Lymph Node Surgery

The information in this handout describes how to do arm and shoulder exercises, and a breathing exercise after your breast or axillary lymph node surgery. These exercises are to help improve your posture, increase your range of motion and relax and ease any pain and tightness around your incision (surgical cut). This is also a very good exercise to relieve tension during the day.

Ask your surgeon when it's safe for you to start doing these exercises.

When should I start exercising?

If you had surgery without reconstruction and without drains, you may begin doing the exercises in this handout on the first day after your surgery, as long as your surgeon tells you it is safe.

If you had breast surgery with reconstruction and with drains, talk with a member of your plastic surgery team about when it's safe to do each of these exercises. A member of your plastic surgery team will also tell you how much to limit your range of motion after surgery.

Shoulder exercises requiring above-the-shoulder movement should be started **only** after the drains are removed. These exercises are noted as “**after drains are removed**” exercises.

What is Deep Breathing?

Slow, deep, controlled breathing can help you relax, and relieve stress, ease, pain, and or tightness around your incision, and improve lymph flow. This is the first exercise you should begin doing after your surgery.

How is Belly Breathing Done?

- **Find a comfortable position.** Lie down, stand, or sit upright as you practice your breath work.
- **Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose.** Let the air completely fill your lungs. Resist the urge to exhale quickly before you've fully inhaled.
- **Let your belly expand.** As you draw in a deep breath, let your belly expand by an inch or two. Place a hand on your belly, and the other on your chest, as you inhale. You can tell you're breathing deeply and properly if the hand on your belly rises out further than the one on your chest as you inhale.
- **Exhale fully.** Let out your breath through either your mouth or your nose. As you breathe out, pull in your belly toward your spine while exhaling all of the breath out of your lungs. After you exhale, take in another deep breath through your nose and continue breathing deeply. Try to exhale for twice as long as you inhale, and fully expel the air.

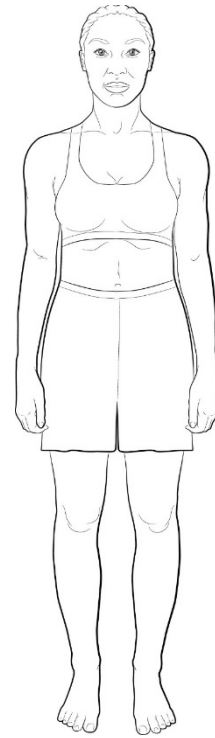
Posture

Your posture is the way you carry your head, neck and shoulders. Good posture is important to have full shoulder movement, more energy and less stress and fatigue. If you can maintain correct posture after surgery, you will increase your overall comfort. We recommend taking a look at your posture in a mirror from the front and the side to see that your back is erect as possible, shoulders are level and that your chin is tucked.

The Mirror Test

(Front view) Stand facing a full length mirror and check to see if:

1. Your shoulders are level.
2. Your head is straight.
3. The spaces between your arms and sides seem equal.
4. Your hips are level, and your kneecaps face straight ahead.
5. Your ankles are straight.



(Side View) This is much easier to do with the help of another, or by having another person take a photo of you.

Check for the following:

1. Head is erect, not slumping forward or backwards.
2. Chin is parallel to the floor, not tilting up or down.
3. Shoulders are in line with ears, not drooping forward or pulled back.
4. Stomach is flat.
5. Knees are straight.
6. Lower back has a slightly forward curve (not too flat or not curved too much forward, creating a hollow back).

Chin Tuck: Sitting in a relaxed position with your back erect, move your head backwards as far as possible, tucking in your chin. Make a double chin as you continue looking straight ahead. Hold for 5 seconds. Relax. Repeat.

Number of repetitions: 10

How often: 2 times a day



Shoulder Shrug: Sit or stand comfortably with shoulders relaxed. If possible, look in a mirror to make sure your shoulders are level. Shrug your shoulders up and toward your ears. Hold for 5 seconds. Relax. Repeat.

Number of repetitions: 10

How often: 2 times a day



Shoulder Roll: Sit or stand comfortably with shoulders relaxed. If possible, look in a mirror to make sure your collarbone is moving evenly. Move your shoulders up, back and down in a circular motion.

Relax. Repeat.

Number of repetitions: 10

How often: 2 times a day



W Exercise: Do this exercise standing or sitting. You can also do this exercise with your back against the wall to help maintain the position correctly.

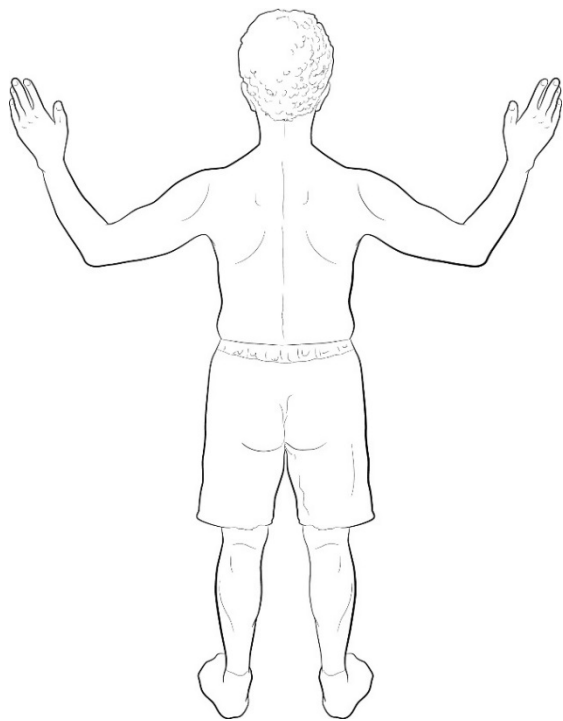
Form a “W” with your arms out to your side and palms facing forward. Try to bring your hands up so that they are even with your face. If you cannot raise your arms that high, bring them to your most comfortable, highest position.

Pinch your shoulder blades together and downward, as if you’re squeezing a pencil between your shoulder blades.

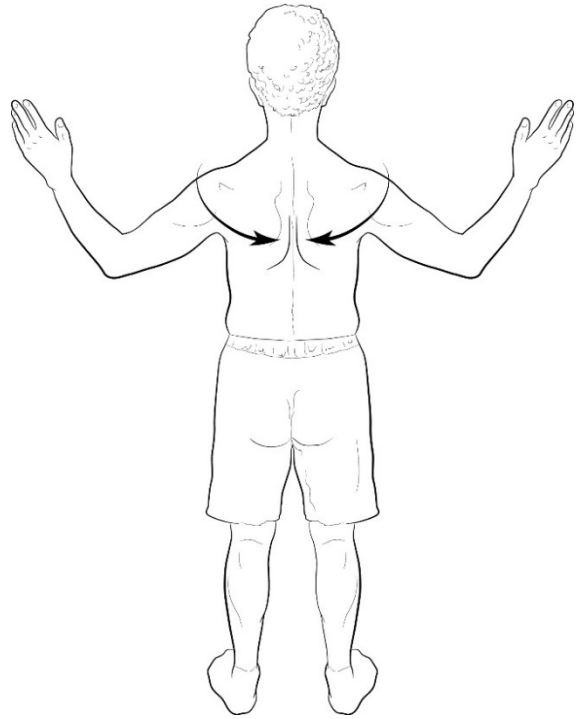
If you feel discomfort in the area of your incision, stop the exercise and do some deep breathing exercises. If the discomfort passes, try to bring your arms back a little further. If the discomfort does not pass, do not reach any further. Hold the furthest position you can squeeze your shoulder blades together for 5 seconds.

Number of repetitions: 10

How often: 1 time a day



Starting Position



Ending Position

Shoulder Mobility Exercises

Using your arm in everyday activities, such as letting your arms swing as you walk is an excellent means of regaining the shoulder mobility that you had before surgery. The following exercises will help you regain full shoulder mobility.

Perform these exercises slowly. Continue these exercises until full arm mobility is achieved.

Arm Circles (Backward/Forward): Do this exercise with each arm separately, one arm at a time. Do not do this exercise with both arms at the same time. This will put too much pressure on your chest. Check with your surgeon when to begin this exercise.

Stand with your feet slightly apart. Raise your affected arm out to the side as high as you can. Begin making slow, backward circles in the air with your arm. Be sure the movement is occurring at the shoulder and not at the elbow. Keep your elbow straight.

Gradually increase the size of your circles until they are as large as you can comfortably make them. Try to complete at least 10 full backward circles. If you feel any aching or if your arm is tired, take a break and rest your arm at your side. Continue doing the exercise when you feel better.

Rest your arm before the second part of the arm circle exercise.

To do the second part of the exercise, raise your affected arm out to the side as high as you can. Begin making slow, forward circles.



Arm Circles Left



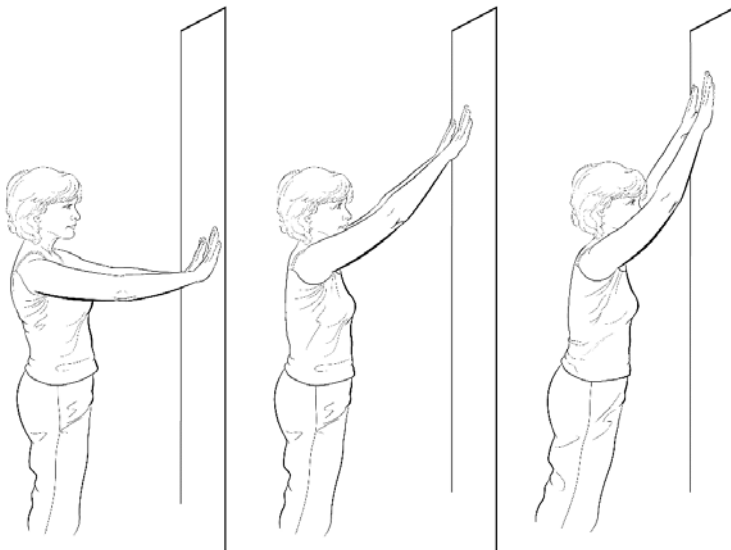
Arm Circles Right

Forward Wall Slide (after drains are removed): You will need two pieces of tape for this exercise and soft cloth to help you slide your hands up the wall.

- Start out about six inches from the wall. Reach as high as you can with your unaffected arm and mark the spot with a piece of tape. This will be your goal for your affected arm. If you had surgery on both breasts, set your goal using the arm that moves most freely and comfortably.
- Place both hands on the wall with soft cloth underneath your hands, at a level that is comfortable. Slide your hands up the wall as far as possible, keeping them even with each other. Try not to look up at your hands, but continue to look straight ahead and keep your back straight.
- When you get to the point where you feel a good stretch (no pain), do the deep breathing exercise that we discussed earlier in the handout. Each time you raise your hands try to slide up a little higher.
- Then slide your fingers down the wall to the starting position.
- Repeat.
- Each day mark with a piece of tape the highest point you reached with your affected arm. This will help you see your improvement.

Number of repetitions: 10

How often: 1 time a day



Side Shoulder Wall Slides (after drains are removed): You will need two pieces of tape for this exercise and soft cloth to help you slide your hands up the wall.

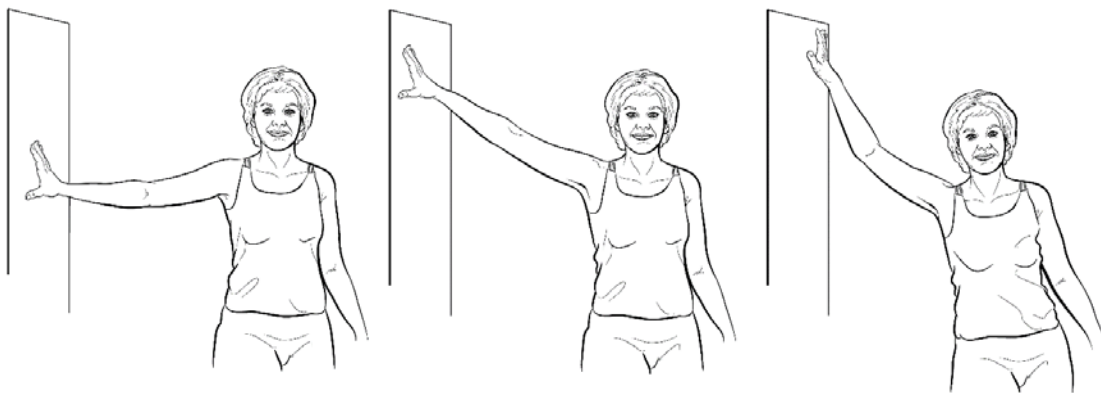
Start out about 12 inches from the wall. Reach as high as you can with your unaffected arm and mark the spot with a piece of tape. This will be your goal for your affected arm. If you had surgery on both breasts, set your goal using the arm that moves most freely and comfortably.

- Turn your body so that your affected side is now facing the wall. Place your hand with the soft cloth underneath on the wall beginning at shoulder level. Slide your fingers up the wall as far as possible. When you get to the point where you feel a good stretch (but not pain), do the deep breathing exercise that we discussed earlier.
- Each time you raise your hand, try to slide a little higher.
- Return to starting position by sliding your fingers back down the wall.
- Each day mark with a piece a tape the highest point you reached with your affected arm. This will help you see your improvement.

You should not feel any pain while doing this exercise. It is normal to feel some tightness or pulling across the side of your chest. By focusing on your normal breathing, your tightness should decrease. Do not hold your breath.

Number of repetitions: 10 times

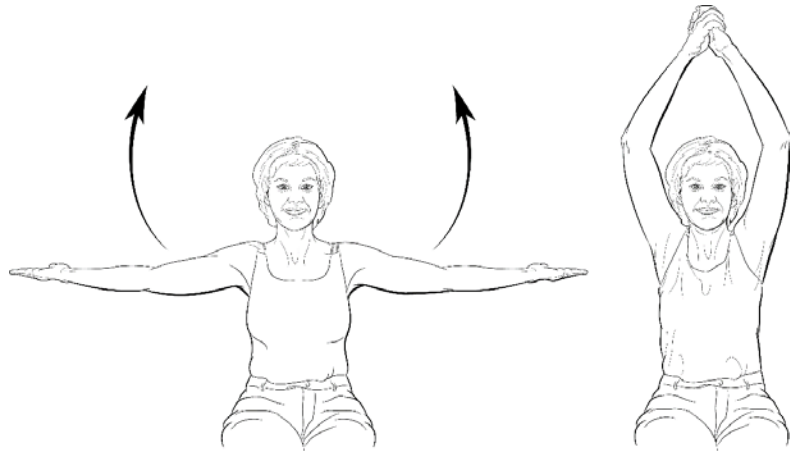
How often: 1time a day



Victory Arms (after drains are removed): Sit or stand comfortably with shoulders relaxed. If possible, look in a mirror to make sure your shoulders are moving evenly. Move your arms outward away from your sides, raise your arms upward (keep your elbows straight), clasp hands overhead; hold for 5 seconds, return to sides. Relax. Repeat.

Number of repetitions: 10

How often: Two times a day



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