

Exercises After Breast Surgery

This booklet is a review of some of the things you learned during the class for breast surgery patients. It covers:

- the sensations you may feel after surgery,
- exercises to regain full motion in the shoulder on the operated side, and
- lymphedema.

Sensations

After your operation you may have new sensations on the side of surgery. There are three kinds of sensations.

- Incisional

It is common to feel some discomfort or pulling in the area of the incision. If this becomes painful, stop and exercise at a level below this threshold. You do not want to irritate it. When your surgeon tells you that the incision is completely healed, you can stretch fully in all directions.

- Referred

You may have referred sensations. They can be on the side of your surgery in the:

- upper arm
- forearm
- hand
- shoulder blade
- ribcage area

They occur because the small nerves in the skin were affected by the surgery. They vary from person to person. Patients describe them as sensitivity, numbness, tingling, twinges, or burning. Not all patients feel them in the same way or with the same intensity. Speak with your doctor about the possibility of taking a medicine if they are interfering with your routine. The sensations may gradually get better as the nerves heal. Healing time varies. You may have them for weeks, months, or even forever. Referred sensations may be uncomfortable, but they are normal. They should not interfere with your daily activities or your exercises.

- Phantom Sensation

This is a feeling that the absent breast or nipple is still present after surgery. This sensation is also normal. It will usually disappear with time. Try putting gentle pressure on the area with a pillow or towel. This might lessen the sensation.

Exercises

You can start the exercises on the first day after surgery if your surgeon tells you it is safe. They are designed to help you regain full range of motion in your affected shoulder. With full range, you will be able to:

- move your arm overhead and to the side,
- touch the back of your neck, and
- touch the middle of your back.

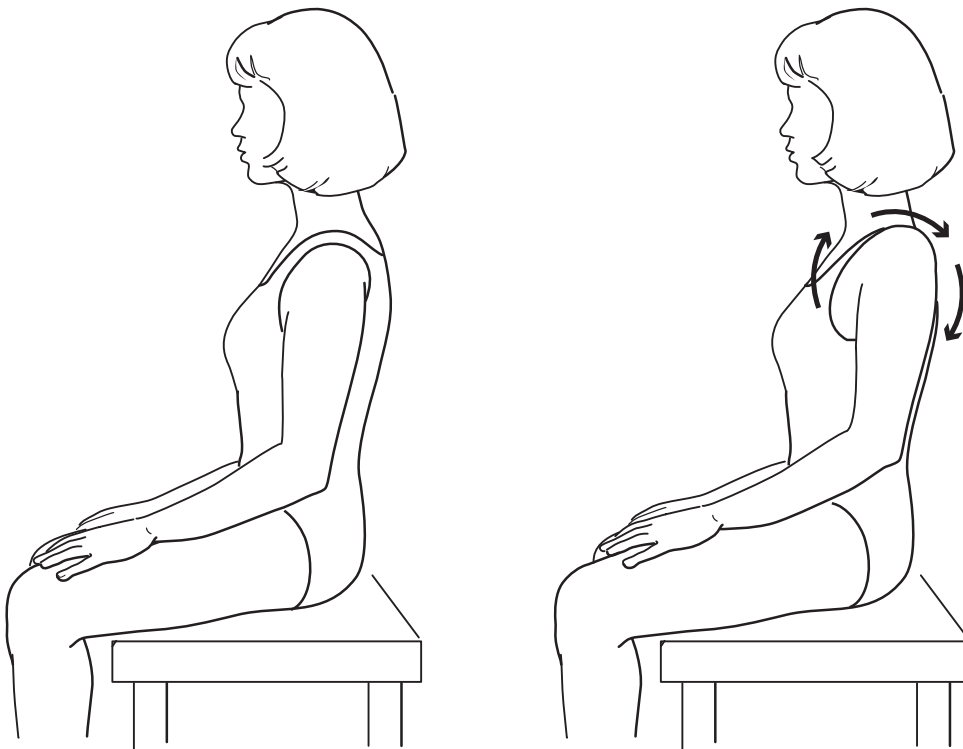
Do the exercises three times a day until you can use your arm as you did before surgery. This includes activities at work, at home, and in recreation or sports. If you had limited movement in your shoulder before surgery, your goal will be to regain as much movement as you had before. Many people report full range of motion by four weeks after surgery. If you do not have it at that time, tell your doctor. He or she will decide whether you need further rehabilitation.

Exaggerated deep breathing will help you with your exercises and make it easier to relax. Sit comfortably in a chair and take a slow deep breath through your nose. Let your chest and belly expand. Now, exhale slowly through your mouth. This can be repeated several times. This breathing technique is useful when you do your exercises because it may ease discomfort or tightness around your incision. As a matter of fact, this deep breathing is a very good technique to relieve tension during the day.

These exercises should be performed three times a day. For two of the exercises you will need tape to mark your progress, so have four pieces ready before you begin.

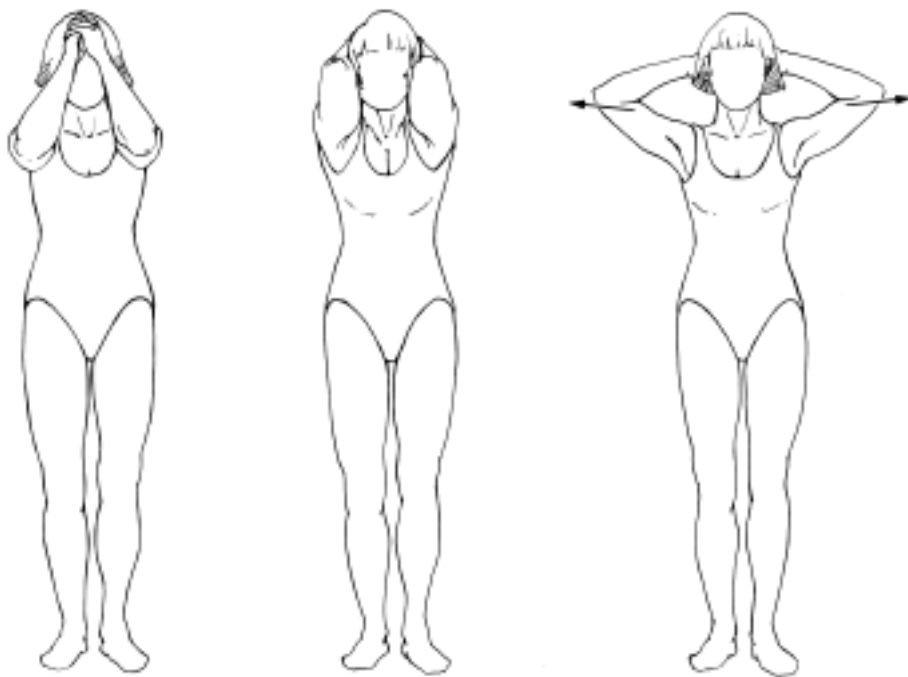
Shoulder Roll

Standing or sitting comfortably in your chair, gently roll your shoulders forward, up, back, and down. Repeat this ten times. Then repeat in the reverse direction ten times. The shoulder roll is a good beginning exercise, since it provides a gentle stretch to the chest and shoulder muscles.



Clasp, Lift, and Stretch

Stand or sit comfortably with your feet on the floor. Clasp your hands together on your lap; keep your head level. Slowly raise your hands toward your head keeping your elbows together. Slide your hands over your head until you reach the back of your neck. When you get to this point, spread your elbows out to the side. Maintain this position for one minute.



If you feel incisional discomfort while doing this exercise, hold your position and work on the breathing technique - breathing deeply through your nose and exhaling slowly through your mouth. If the discomfort does not go away, keep your hands in that position for the rest of the exercise. If the discomfort eases, continue by moving your hands until they eventually reach the back of your neck and then stretch with your elbows out to the side. You may not be able to get to this position the first time you try the exercise but you will notice progress each day and, eventually, you will be able to reach this point.

When one minute is up, slowly reverse the steps by bringing your elbows back in front and sliding your hands over your head. Slowly lower your arms.

Arm Circles

If you have had surgery on both breasts, do this exercise with each arm.

Stand with your feet slightly apart for balance. Raise your affected arm out to the side at shoulder height (or as high as possible). Begin making small, slow backward circles in the air with your arm. Be sure the movement is occurring at the shoulder and not at the elbow. Increase the size of the circles until they are as large as you can comfortably make them. Be sure to complete at least 10 full backward circles. Slowly lower your arm to your side. Rest your arm for a moment.



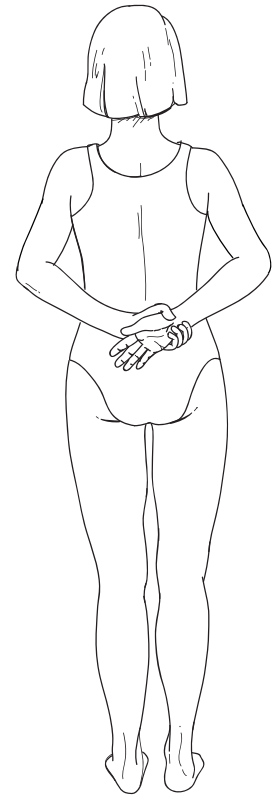
Perform the second part of the exercise by again raising your arm out to the side at shoulder height. Begin making small slow circles with your arm, this time in the forward direction. Increase the size of the circle as much as is comfortable for you. Be sure to complete at least 10 circles in the forward direction. Lower your arm to your side.

Important: If you feel any aching or fatigue in your arm, stop before 10. Slowly build up to 10 repetitions as you get stronger.

Back Climb

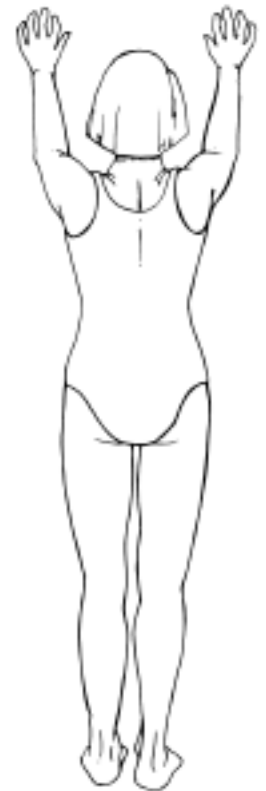
This exercise can be performed either sitting or standing. Place your hands behind your back grasping your involved hand. Slowly slide your hands up the center of your back as far as possible. Hold the highest position for one minute.

If you feel discomfort in the incisional areas, stop at that position and take some deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose and blow out through your mouth several times. If the discomfort passes, try to slide your hands up a little bit further. Remember to hold the highest position for one minute. This exercise helps you regain the movement behind your back. You need this for activities such as hooking your bra, buttoning up a blouse, or zipping up a dress. You should be feeling a gentle stretch in the shoulder area. When one minute is up, lower your hands.



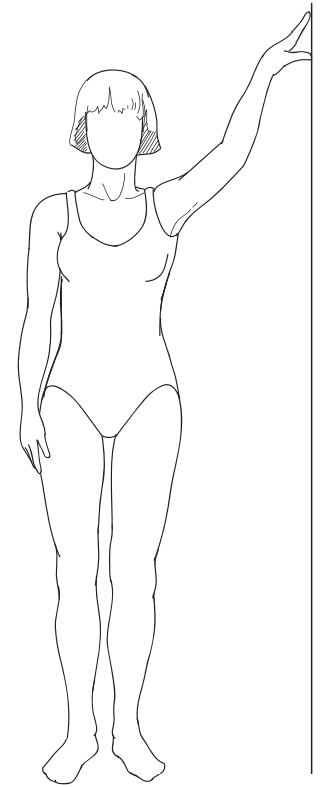
Wall Climb

You will need two pieces of tape for this exercise. Stand six inches away from the wall. Reach as high as you can with your unaffected arm and using a piece of tape, mark that point. This will be the goal for your affected arm. If you have had surgery on both breasts, you may set your goal using the arm that moves more comfortably. Place both hands against the wall at the shoulder level. Walk your fingers up the wall as far as possible keeping them even with each other. Try not to look up toward your hands or arch your back. When you get to the point where you feel a good stretch (but not pain), do the breathing technique for 3 breaths. Return to the starting position by walking your fingers back down the wall. Repeat this five times. On the fifth climb, mark the highest position achieved. This will allow you to note your progress each time you exercise.



Side Wall Climb

You will need two pieces of tape for this exercise. Stand with your uninvolved side facing a wall, about one foot away from the wall. Reach up with your uninvolved hand as far as possible and mark the highest position you can reach. This will be the goal for your affected arm. If you have had surgery on both breasts, set your goal using the arm that moves more comfortably. Turn so your involved side is now facing the wall. Walk 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 breathing technique for 3 breaths. Return to the starting position by walking your fingers down the wall. Repeat this five times. On the fifth climb, mark the highest position you achieve. This will allow you to note your progress each time you exercise.

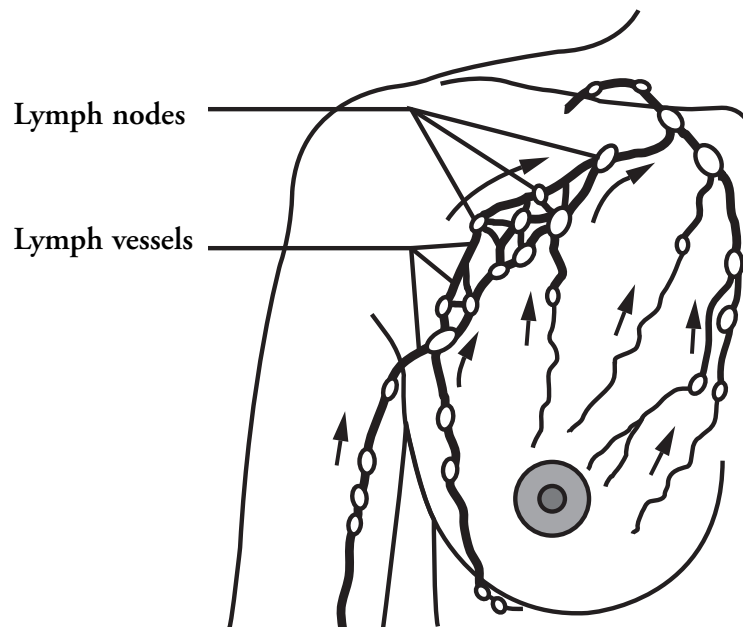


Lymphedema

Lymphedema is an abnormal swelling in your hand or arm on the side of your surgery. It can also occur as swelling in the breast or chest wall. If you had your lymph nodes removed or if you are going to have radiation therapy, you are at risk for developing lymphedema. Lymph nodes are small bean-like structures clustered throughout the body. They are part of a network of vessels similar to blood vessels. These nodes and vessels make up the lymphatic system. It helps the body's immune response by promoting healing and preventing infection.

Radiation therapy and lymph node removal may interfere with the transport of fluid through the lymphatic system. This can lead to swelling in the hand or arm on the side of surgery. Not everyone develops swelling. If you notice signs of it in your arm or hand, raise your arm above your head several times a day while you do hand pumps. Slowly open and close your fist 10 times. Elevate your arm every so often. To elevate your arm if you are sitting, rest the affected arm on a few pillows next to you or on the back of a couch. Your arm should be raised above the level of your heart. Avoid holding your arm over your head for extended periods of time. This may cause the muscles of the arm to fatigue. While sleeping on your back, you may rest your arm on one or two pillows at your side. If you are able to sleep on the opposite side of your surgery, you may place one or two pillows in front of you and rest your arm on those pillows. The elevation and pumping action of the muscles assist gravity to drain the fluid out of the arm. If the swelling does not go down after two days, call your doctor.

Disruption of the lymphatic system also affects your body's ability to fight infection in the affected arm. Therefore, you must be careful to protect your arm and hand on the side of surgery. The nursing staff will give you a booklet called "Hand and Arm Care Following Axillary



Normal lymph drainage.

Lymph Node Dissection.” It gives you specific guidelines on how to protect your arm and hand. If there is a break in the skin, clean the area. Look for signs of infection: swelling, redness, heat, and fever. If you have any of these, call your doctor.

If you have any questions about the exercises or any other information presented here, please call the Rehabilitation Department at 212-639-7833.

