Exercises After Breast Surgery

This information describes how to do arm and shoulder exercises, a breathing exercise, and scar massage after your breast surgery.

Starting the Exercises

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

If you had one of the surgeries listed below, you may start the exercises in this resource on the first day after your surgery as long as your surgeon tells you it’s safe.

- Breast surgery without reconstruction
- Breast surgery with reconstruction using a tissue expander
- Breast surgery with reconstruction using a pedicled latissimus flap (a type of surgery in which tissue is taken from muscles in your back)

If you had another type of breast surgery with reconstruction, don’t start these exercises until your surgeon tells you it’s safe.

Videos Showing the Exercises

Exercises after breast surgery without reconstruction

You can watch a video called Exercises After Breast Surgery Without Reconstruction that shows how to do the exercises. You can also search for it at www.mskcc.org/pe

Exercises after breast surgery with reconstruction

If you had breast surgery with reconstruction, talk with a member of your plastic surgery team about when it’s safe to do each of these exercises. You will have a range of motion restriction, which is how much you need to limit your movement, based on your surgery. The range of motion restriction can be 45, 60,
or 90 degrees. You may find it helpful to write in your restriction below the images of the exercises.

- If you’ve had reconstruction using a tissue expander, watch our video *Exercises After Breast Surgery With Reconstruction Using a Tissue Expander* or search for it on [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe)

- If you’ve had reconstruction using a tissue transfer, watch our video *Exercises After Breast Surgery With Reconstruction Using Tissue Transfer* or search for it on [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe)

**Deep Breathing Exercise**

Exaggerated deep breathing can help you relax and ease discomfort and tightness around your incision (surgical cut). This is also a very good exercise to relieve tension during the day.

To do this exercise, 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. You can repeat this 8 to 10 times.

**Arm and Shoulder Exercises**

Doing arm and shoulder exercises will help you regain full range of motion on the side where you had your surgery, which is called your affected side. With full range of motion, you will be able to:

- Move your arm over your head and out to the side.
- Move your arm behind your neck.
- Move your arm to the middle of your back.

Do each of these exercises 10 times. Do this 5 times a day. Keep doing this until you have regained full range of motion and can use your arm as you did before surgery in all of your normal activities. This includes activities at work, at home, and in recreation or sports. If you had reduced movement in your arm before surgery, your goal will be to regain as much movement as you had before.

If you quickly regain your full range of motion, continue doing these exercises once a day, instead of 5 times a day. This is especially true if you feel any
tightness in your chest, shoulder, or under your affected arm. These exercises can help prevent scar tissue from forming in your armpit and shoulder. Scar tissue can limit your arm movements later.

If you still have trouble moving your shoulder 4 weeks after your surgery, tell your surgeon. They will determine if you need more rehabilitation, such as physical or occupational therapy.

Before you start, gather the following supplies:

- 4 pieces of tape. You’ll use these to mark your progress with some exercises.
- A stopwatch, timer, or watch with a second hand. You’ll use this to time some exercises.

**Shoulder rolls**

The shoulder roll is a good beginning exercise, since it gently stretches your chest and shoulder muscles.

If you had breast surgery without reconstruction, or with reconstruction using a tissue expander, or a pedicled latissimus flap, you may do this exercise on the first day after your surgery, as long as your surgeon tells you it’s safe. If you had another type of breast surgery with reconstruction, only start these exercises when your surgeon tells you it’s safe.

1. Stand or sit comfortably with your arms relaxed at your sides.
2. In a circular motion, bring your shoulders forward, up, backward, and down (see Figure 1). Try to make the circle as large as you can and get both of your shoulders to move at the same time. Do this 10 times.
3. If you have some tightness across your incision or chest, start with smaller circles, but increase the size as the tightness gets better.

4. Now, switch directions and do 10 shoulder rolls in the forward direction. Bring your shoulders backward, up, forward, and down.

You may find that the backward direction is a little tighter across your chest than the forward direction. This will get better with practice.

**Shoulder wings**

If you had breast surgery without reconstruction, or with reconstruction using a tissue expander, or a pedicled latissimus flap, you may do this exercise on the first day after your surgery, as long as your surgeon tells you it’s safe. If you had another type of breast surgery with reconstruction, only start these exercises when your surgeon tells you it’s safe.

The shoulder wings exercise will help you regain outward movement of your shoulder. You can do this exercise while sitting or standing.

1. Place your hands on your chest or collarbone.

2. Raise your elbows out to the side (see Figure 2), limiting your range of motion as instructed by your healthcare team.
3. Slowly lower your elbows.

4. After 10 repetitions, slowly lower your hands back down to your lap.

If you experience discomfort while doing this exercise, hold your position and do the deep breathing exercise. If the discomfort doesn’t go away, don’t raise your elbows any higher. If the discomfort goes away, finish the exercise.

**Arm circles**

If you had breast surgery without reconstruction, or with reconstruction using a tissue expander, or a pedicled latissimus flap, you may do this exercise on the first day after your surgery, as long as your surgeon tells you it’s safe. If you had another type of breast surgery with reconstruction, only start these exercises when your surgeon tells you it’s safe.

If you had surgery on both of your breasts, do this exercise with both arms, one arm at a time. Don’t do this exercise with both arms at the same time. This will put too much pressure on your chest.
1. Stand with your feet slightly apart for balance. Raise your affected arm out to the side as high as you can (see Figure 3). Start making slow, backward circles in the air with your arm. Be sure you’re moving your arm from your shoulder, not your elbow. Keep your elbow straight.

2. Increase the size of the circles until they’re as large as you can comfortably make them, limiting your range of motion as instructed by your healthcare team. Be sure to complete at least 10 full backward circles. If you feel any aching or if your arm is tired, take a break. Continue doing the exercise when you feel better.

3. Slowly lower your arm to your side. Rest your arm for a moment.

4. Next, raise your affected arm out to the side as high as you can. Start making slow, forward circles.

5. Increase the size of the circles until they’re as large as you can comfortably make them. Be sure to complete at least 10 full forward circles. If you feel any aching or if your arm is tired, stop before 10 circles.

6. Lower your arm to your side.

**W exercise**

If you had breast surgery without reconstruction, or with reconstruction using a tissue expander, or a pedicled latissimus flap, you may do this exercise on the first day after your surgery, as long as your surgeon tells you it’s safe. If you had another type of breast surgery with reconstruction, only start these exercises
when your surgeon tells you it’s safe.

The W exercise can be done standing, sitting, or lying on your back. Doing this exercise with your back against a wall may help you position yourself properly.

1. Form a “W” with your arms out to the side and palms facing forward (see Figure 4). Try to bring your hands up so that they’re even with your face. Make sure to limit your range of motion as instructed by your healthcare team. If you can’t raise your arms that high, bring them to the highest comfortable position.

![Figure 4. W exercise](image)

Range of motion: ______ degrees

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

3. If you feel discomfort in the area near your incision, stop at that position and do the deep breathing exercise. If the discomfort passes, try to bring your arms back a little further. If the discomfort doesn’t pass, don’t reach any further. Hold the furthest position you can and squeeze your shoulder blades together for 5 seconds.

4. Slowly bring your arms back down to the starting position. Repeat this exercise 10 times.

**Back climb**

If you had breast surgery without reconstruction or with reconstruction with a tissue expander you may do this exercise on the first day after your surgery, as
long as your surgeon tells you it’s safe. If you had other breast surgeries with reconstruction, only start this exercise when your surgeon tells you it’s safe.

You can do the back climb in a sitting or standing position. You will need a timer or stopwatch for this exercise.

1. Place your hands behind your back and grasp the hand on your affected side with your other hand (see Figure 5). If you had surgery on both breasts, use whichever arm moves most easily to grasp the other. Do this stretch for one arm at a time only. Don’t do the stretch with both arms at the same time.

2. Slowly slide your hands up the center of your back as far as possible. Hold the highest position for 1 minute.

3. If you feel pulling or stretching near your incision, stop at that position and do the deep breathing exercise. If the tightness goes away, try to slide your hands up a little further. If it’s still there, don’t slide your hands up any further.

4. Hold the highest position you can for 1 minute. You should feel a gentle stretch in your shoulder area.

5. After 1 minute, slowly lower your hands.

6. If you had surgery on both breasts, repeat the exercise using your other arm.

**Hands behind neck**

If you had breast surgery **without reconstruction**, you can start doing this
exercise on the first day after your surgery as long as your surgeon tells you it’s safe. If you had breast surgery with reconstruction, only start this exercise when your surgeon tells you it’s safe.

You can do the hands behind neck exercise in a sitting or standing position. You will need a timer or stopwatch for this exercise.

1. Stand or sit comfortably with your feet on the floor. Clasp your hands together on your lap.

2. Slowly raise your hands toward your head, keeping your elbows together in front of you and not out to the sides (see Figure 6). Keep your head level. Don’t bend your neck or head forward.

3. 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. Hold this position for 1 minute. If you aren’t able to get into this position, reach up and stretch your elbows back as best you can. Breathe normally. Don’t hold your breath as you stretch your body.

4. If you have some tightness across your incision or chest, hold your position and do the deep breathing exercise. If the tightness gets better, continue with the movement. If the tightness stays the same, hold the position you are most comfortable in for 1 minute.

5. Slowly come out of the stretch by bringing your elbows back in front of you and sliding your hands over your head. Then, slowly lower your arms to your
Forward wall crawls

If you had breast surgery without reconstruction, you can start doing this exercise on the first day after your surgery as long as your surgeon tells you it’s safe. If you had breast surgery with reconstruction, only start this exercise when your surgeon tells you it’s safe.

You will need 2 pieces of tape for the forward wall crawl exercise.

1. Stand facing a wall. Your toes should be about 6 inches from the wall.

2. Reach as high as you can with your unaffected arm and mark that point with a piece of tape. This will be the goal for your affected arm. If you had surgery on both breasts, set your goal using the arm that moves most comfortably.

3. Place both hands against the wall at a level that’s comfortable. Crawl your fingers up the wall as far as possible, keeping them even with each other (see Figure 7). Try not to look up toward your hands or arch your back.

4. When you get to the point where you feel a good stretch, but not pain, do the deep breathing exercise.

5. Return to the starting position by crawling your fingers back down the wall.

6. Repeat the wall crawl 10 times. Each time you raise your hands, try to crawl a little bit higher.

Figure 7. Forward wall crawls
7. On the tenth crawl, use the other piece of tape to mark the highest point you reached with your affected arm. This will allow you to see your progress each time you do this exercise.

As you become more flexible while doing this exercise, you may need to take a step closer to the wall so that you can reach a little higher.

**Side wall crawls**

If you had breast surgery *without reconstruction*, you can start doing side wall crawls on the first day after your surgery as long as your surgeon tells you it’s safe. If you had breast surgery *with reconstruction*, only start this exercise when your surgeon tells you it’s safe.

You will also need 2 pieces of tape for the side wall crawl exercise.

1. Stand with your unaffected side closest to the wall, about 1 foot away from the wall.

2. Reach as high as you can with your unaffected arm. Mark that point with a piece of tape (see Figure 8). This will be the goal for your affected arm. If you’ve had surgery on both breasts, set your goal using the arm that moves most comfortably.

3. Turn your body so that your affected side is now closest to the wall. Crawl 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. Return
to the starting position by crawling your fingers back down the wall.

4. Repeat this exercise 10 times.

5. On your tenth crawl, use the other piece of tape to mark the highest point you reached with your affected arm. This will allow you to see your progress each time you do the exercise.

6. If you had surgery on both breasts, repeat the exercise with your other arm.

You shouldn’t feel pain while doing this exercise. It is normal to feel some tightness or pulling across the side of your chest. Focus on your breathing until the tightness decreases. You should breathe normally throughout this exercise. Don’t hold your breath.

Be careful not to turn your body toward the wall while doing this exercise. Keep your body at a 90-degree angle to the wall.

**Scar Massage**

Many people feel uncomfortable touching their skin in the area of their scar. It’s very important that you become comfortable moving the skin over this area. Moving the skin will help improve the circulation and soften the tissue.

Don’t start doing the massage until your incision has fully healed and your nurse tells you it’s safe. There should be no open wounds or scabbed areas. The area of the scar may be numb or extra sensitive at first. Both of these feelings are normal after surgery.

To do the massage, place 2 or 3 fingers over the scar and gently move the skin in all directions. Then, pick up your fingers and move them 1 or 2 inches in each direction of the area of the scar and repeat the massage. Don’t squeeze your breast tissue. Do this massage once a day for 5 to 10 minutes.

**Swelling**

After your surgery, you may have some swelling or puffiness in your hand or arm on your affected side. This is normal and will usually go away on its own.

If you notice swelling in your hand or arm, raise your arm above your head several times a day while doing hand pumps. To do hand pumps, slowly open
and close your fist 10 times. Doing this will help drain the fluid out of your arm.

You may also raise your arm a few times a day for about 20 minutes at a time. To raise your arm while sitting or while lying on your back, rest your arm on a few pillows next to you. Your arm should be raised above the level of your heart. Don’t hold your arm straight up over your head for more than a few minutes. This can cause the muscles of your arm to get tired.

If you’re able to sleep on your unaffected side you may place 1 or 2 pillows in front of you and rest your arm on them. If the swelling doesn’t go down within 4 to 6 weeks, call your doctor or nurse.

If you have any questions, call the Rehabilitation Service at 212-639-7833.

If you have any questions or concerns, talk with a member of your healthcare team. You can reach them Monday through Friday from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM at _____________________. After 5:00 PM, during the weekend, and on holidays, please call____________________. If there’s no number listed, or you’re not sure, call 212-639-2000.

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