



**Northumbria Healthcare**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# **Advice following breast surgery:**

## **Mastectomy, wide local excision and tissue expander**

Issued by physiotherapy

## How can physiotherapy help me after my operation?

- Deep breathing exercises reduce your risk of developing a chest infection
- Arm exercises help you regain the movement and proper use of your arm
- Management of any problems such as pain, scar tethering or pulling feelings in your arm (cording)

## Why should I do breathing exercises?

A general anaesthetic combined with the dry air in hospital can make the secretions that are normally in your nose, mouth and chest a bit more sticky than usual. Taking some deep breaths and coughing can help to remove any secretions and reduce the risk of chest infection. A good supply of oxygen in the blood can also help with wound healing.

## Why do I need to do circulatory exercises?

It is important to have good circulation in the legs to prevent deep vein thrombosis. Do not lie or sit with legs crossed. Moving your feet and ankles up and down, bending and straightening your knees and walking regularly will help to keep a good blood flow.

## Why do I need to exercise after my surgery?

There is a risk of developing shoulder problems such as a stiff or frozen shoulder after this type of surgery. Sometimes you can develop a pulling pain in your armpit and down your arm. This is called cording. Doing your exercises as instructed can help to reduce the risk of such problems.

It is important that you slowly try to regain the same amount of movement that you had before your operation.

If you are to have radiotherapy, you need to achieve the correct position. You need to lie on a bed with your hands resting above your head and your elbows resting out to the sides.



Following the exercise programme can also help to reduce your risk of developing seroma (serous fluid build-up in the area of the operation) and lymphoedema (arm and breast area swelling due to problems with lymphatic flow).

## When do I start my exercises?

You should start your exercises the day after your operation. You may need some painkillers to dull any discomfort that you have. You may have drains in place. Once the drains are removed and your discomfort decreases, your movement should improve. You should never push through pain, a gentle stretch is normal. You should not move your arm past shoulder height for the first week after surgery if you have had a mastectomy or wide local excision.

**If you have had a tissue expander or implant, you should not take your arm above shoulder height for three weeks after your surgery. Your physiotherapist will advise you when to progress your movement.**

If you have had a tissue expander or implant inserted under the big muscle on the front of your chest, it is important that you do not overstretch this muscle. You should not put your hand behind your head or back, push anything heavy or lift and carry anything heavy with the affected side. You should not drive for three to four weeks. Make sure you fasten your bra at the front and then swivel it around.

## When should I start set one of my shoulder exercises?

These should be started the day after your surgery. Practise them 3-4 times a day with 5-10 repetitions each time.

Remember to work within your pain limits, do not force any movements. Continue your exercises until you have your physiotherapy review, which will be between 2-3 weeks following your surgery.

1. Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears, and then relax them.
2. Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears, then circle them back and down. Try taking some deep breaths while doing this.
3. Place hand on shoulder. Slowly raise your elbow forwards up to shoulder height. Then lower it down.
4. Place your hand on your shoulder. Slowly raise your elbow up to the side to shoulder height. Then lower it down.
5. Place both hands on shoulders. Slowly circle your elbows. Gradually aim to get your elbows to shoulder height.



Exercise 6 can be done in sitting and progress to standing:

6. Pendular exercise. Let your affected arm hang down by your side. Swing the arm in small, relaxed circles. Support the breast area during this exercise.



**If you have had a breast reconstruction using a tissue expander or implant do not start exercise 7 or 8 until you are told to by your physiotherapist.**

7. Place your hands behind your head. Take your elbows out to the side and then bring them forward.



8. Take your hand behind your back, reaching up as far as possible between your shoulder blades.



**Set two exercises** – to be done in sitting or standing.

If you have had a mastectomy or wide local excision you can start exercises 9 and 10 about 7 days after your surgery provided your drain has been removed. If your drain remains in for longer than this, start them once it has been removed. They should be practised 3 - 4 times each day and between 5 - 10 times each session along with your previous exercises.

9. Place your arm by your side with your elbow straight. Raise your arm forwards and up above your head to the point of discomfort. Then slowly bring it back down. You should gradually increase your movement over the following 2 – 3 weeks.



10. Place your arm by your side with your elbow straight. Raise your arm out to the side away from your body, turning the palm of your hand upwards, and continue up towards your head to the point of discomfort. Slowly bring your arm back down again. You should gradually increase your movement over the following 2 – 3 weeks.



**If you have had a tissue expander or implant inserted, do not start exercises 9 and 10 until you are advised to by your physiotherapist.**

**This will usually be at around three weeks following your surgery and once the wound is healed and the process of expansion of the tissue expander is due to start or has started.**

## **What is Lymphoedema?**

Lymphoedema is swelling which can occur in the arm and breast tissue after lymph nodes are removed and after radiotherapy.

## **How can I reduce my risk of developing Lymphoedema?**

- By achieving a good range of movement at your shoulder
- By applying moisturiser to keep your skin in good condition
- By making sure that any cuts or scratches to the arm do not become infected
- By avoiding injections and blood pressure taking on the affected side

From now on, you should use a non-perfumed moisturiser on the arm and around the breast area on the operated side, avoiding the scar until it is well healed.

## How long should I continue with the exercises?

You should continue doing these exercises at home 3 – 4 times daily until your arm is moving easily and comfortably. If you are to have radiotherapy, you should continue them gently while having treatment and then continue them for 18 months after your treatment has finished, minimising problems with any stiffness which may occur.

## When should I return to work?

When you return to work will depend on what your job involves. Please feel free to discuss this with your doctor or physiotherapist.

## How soon can I resume normal activities?

You should try to gradually increase your daily activities, remembering that the tissues take time to fully recover. Do not push through pain.

If you have had a **mastectomy or wide local excision**, for the first 2-4 weeks after your operation lift only light objects with your affected arm. You can perform light household duties such as dusting, washing up or cooking. Gradually return to your normal activities, remembering that you should avoid any lifting that places a strain on your affected arm. Limit the time spent doing activities such as knitting, reading, writing and computer work for the first 2 - 4 weeks as they use static muscle contraction and this can cause discomfort.

If you have had a **tissue expander inserted**, you can gradually start using your arm more normally once the process of filling it has started.

## When can I start driving again?

Only when you feel confident that you are safe and able to react in an emergency situation should you start driving again. This is usually around three weeks following mastectomy or wide local excision. If you have had reconstruction, you should not drive until you have been advised to do so by your physiotherapist or surgeon. This will be approximately 3-6 weeks after your surgery and is dependent on how your wound is healing.

**Sport and leisure** - if your scar has healed and your shoulder movement is good, you may begin swimming. You should not swim while you are having radiotherapy or chemotherapy due to the risk of infection.

**If you have had a reconstruction you may need to wait longer before swimming. Ask your physiotherapist for advice at your post-operative appointment.**

Most other activities can be restarted within two months. Please feel free to discuss particular activities with your physiotherapist.

## What happens if I have problems with my arm movement?

You will receive a post-operative appointment with a physiotherapist, however, if you are having pain or difficulty moving your shoulder or arm, or the scar area feels tethered, please contact your physiotherapist for further advice.

Your physiotherapist is:

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Contact number:

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## Support contact numbers:

### Breast care physiotherapists

North Tyneside General Hospital	0191 2934064
Wansbeck General Hospital	01670 564010 / 564011
Hexham General Hospital	01434 655031

### Breast care nurses

North Tyneside General Hospital	0191 2934183
Wansbeck General Hospital	01670 529319
Hexham General Hospital	01434 655386

### Breast reconstruction nurses

North Tyneside General Hospital	0191 2934687
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### Breast Cancer Care Helpline

[www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

0808 800 6000

### Macmillan Cancer Relief Helpline

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

0845 601 6161

### Breast Cancer Campaign

[www.breastcare.co.uk](http://www.breastcare.co.uk)



## Alternative Formats

If you would like a copy of this information in large print, another language, audio tape or other format please call the Contact Centre on 03 44 811 8118.

## Other sources of information

### NHS 111

### NHS Choices

[www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx)

### NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)

[www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Freephone: 0800 032 0202

Text: 07815 500015

Email: [northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk](mailto:northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk)

### Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

General Enquiries 03 44 811 8111

[www.northumbria.nhs.uk](http://www.northumbria.nhs.uk)

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