



**Northumbria Healthcare**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Exercise for Arm Lymphoedema

Issued by the Lymphoedema / Breast Team



**This leaflet gives you information on exercises.**

## **Exercise is an essential component of lymphoedema management**

You may already be familiar with practising upper limb exercises if you had breast surgery. At that time the aim was to restore the range of movement and function of your arm.

When you have arm lymphoedema it is vital you practise regular exercises because:

- muscle contractions assists lymph drainage
- exercise will reduce ache, keep your joints supple and muscles strong
- postural exercises can help relieve discomfort around the neck and shoulders caused by the extra weight in your arm
- exercise will help to make everyday activities easier

### **Remember – when you exercise you should:**

- give yourself enough time and exercise somewhere warm and comfortable
- wear your compression sleeve (if you have one), while you exercise. It will enhance the pumping effect to assist lymph drainage
- practice your exercises in slow, rhythmical movements aiming for full range of movements which are pain free
- try to do your exercises twice a day for about 15 minutes, ideally after your lymphatic drainage technique
- gently brace your deep abdominal muscles while you exercise to improve your postural support

**Be careful** – if your arm aches, or the affected area becomes pink or hot, it is a sign that you have been too active. No movements should ever be painful.

## **Recommended Exercises**

### **1. Diaphragmatic Breathing**

Place your hands on your abdomen. Imagine you are filling up a balloon deep inside your chest. Breathe in and fill up underneath your hands. Now breathe out and let your abdomen fall as you breathe out. – Repeat x 5

### **2. Shoulder Girdle**

- a) Lift your shoulders up to your ears, slowly lower down.  
– Repeat x 5
  
- b) Circle your shoulders, first forwards, then backwards.  
– Repeat x 5

### **3. Shoulder**

- a) Lift your arm forwards as high as you can above your head, leading with your thumb. Slowly lower down.  
– Repeat x 5
  
- b) Lift your arm out to the side with your palm facing the ceiling, as high as you can. Slowly lower down.  
– Repeat x 5
  
- c) Reach your hand behind your head, with your elbow stretched back as far as possible. Slowly lower down.  
– Repeat x 5
  
- d) Reach your hand behind your back as high as possible. Slowly lower down. – Repeat x 5

#### **4. Elbow**

- a) Bend your elbow to touch your hand on your shoulder. Now straighten your elbow and stretch it out as far as possible.  
– Repeat x 5
  - b) Keep your elbow in at your side, bent at right angles. Turn your palm towards the floor, then up to the ceiling.  
– Repeat x 5
- You can rest your hand on a cushion for the next exercises.
  - Taking the weight off your shoulder can make them more comfortable.

#### **5. Wrist**

- a) Move your wrist backwards then forwards. – Repeat x 5
- b) Circle your wrist first one way, then the other. – Repeat x 5

#### **6. Fingers and Thumb**

- a) Make a tight fist, then stretch your fingers and thumb right out. – Repeat x 5
- b) Keep your fingers straight. Spread your fingers wide apart then bring them in together. – Repeat x 5
- c) Spread your fingers apart. Touch the tip of your thumb with the tip of each finger, one at a time, stretching out again between each move. – Repeat x 5

## 7. Diaphragmatic Breathing

As 1. above, to complete the exercises. – Repeat x 5

- If you have a particular problem area of swelling, try increasing the repetitions of the exercises nearest the swelling to x10 each time

### Useful tips:

- Placing light objects you use regularly (like tea caddies, coffee jars) on a high shelf will ensure you get extra stretches and more exercise every time you reach for them.
- If you want to increase your activity levels or take up a new sport, do so gradually. This will allow your arm to adjust to the changes in demands made on the lymph system.
- Swimming or exercises in water are helpful forms of exercise as the water supports your body while you exercise.
- Try to avoid letting your arm hang down for long periods as this can increase swelling in your arm due to an accumulation of lymph fluid.
- Opening and closing your fist while you are walking will help improve lymph drainage.
- When relaxing, try to rest your arm slightly elevated with the elbow straight.

If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact your Breast Care Nurse or Physiotherapist:

### Physiotherapist:

North Tyneside General Hospital (0191) 293 4064

Wansbeck General Hospital (01670) 564010

## **Support Contact Numbers**

### **Breast Care Nurse**

North Tyneside General Hospital  
(0191) 293 4183

### **Breast Care Nurse**

Wansbeck General Hospital  
(01670) 529319

### **Breast Care Nurse**

Hexham General Hospital  
(01434) 655386

### **Breast Practitioners**

Wansbeck General Hospital  
01670 529636

### **Breast Cancer Care Helpline**

0808 800 6000 or website: [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

### **Macmillan Cancer Relief Helpline**

0845 601 6161 or website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

### **Breast Care Campaign**

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

### **British Lymphology Society (BLS)**

[www.thebls.com](http://www.thebls.com)

### **Lymphoedema Support Network (LSN)**

[www.lymphoedema.org](http://www.lymphoedema.org)



## 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: 01670 511098

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)

PIN 201/V3

Review date: November 2021

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