

Exercises After Breast Surgery

Sara Cohen OTR/L, CLT-LANA

Jean Kotkiewicz DPT, CLT, WCC

Maryann Herklotz, PT

Teresa Fitzpatrick, PT, MBA

This booklet describes arm and shoulder exercises. They will help you regain motion in the arm on the operated side.

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. If you quickly regain full range of motion, continue doing the exercises once a day. This is especially true if you feel a stretch in the chest or under the arm during certain exercises. If so, continue doing those exercises. The exercises will help prevent scar tissue from forming, and interfering with your range of motion later.

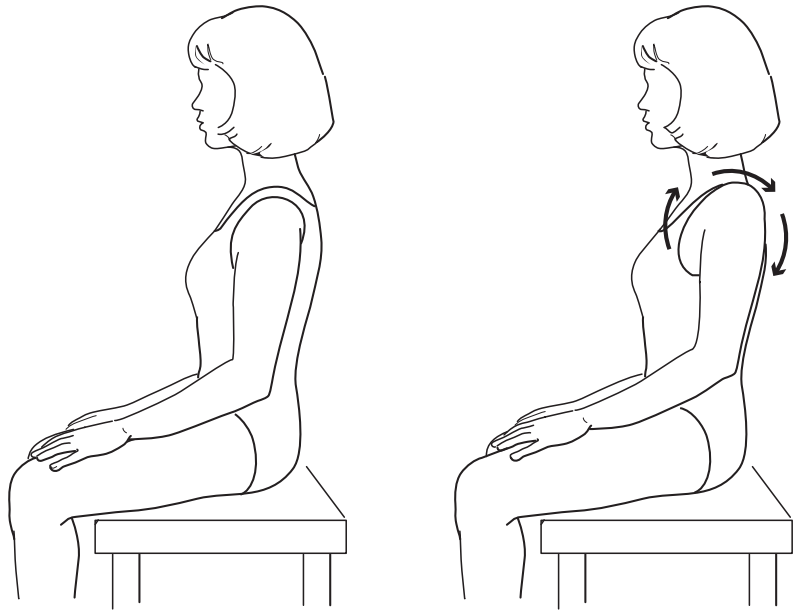
Many people report full range of motion by four weeks after surgery. If you do not have it at that time, tell your doctor. He or she will decide whether you need further rehabilitation.

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.



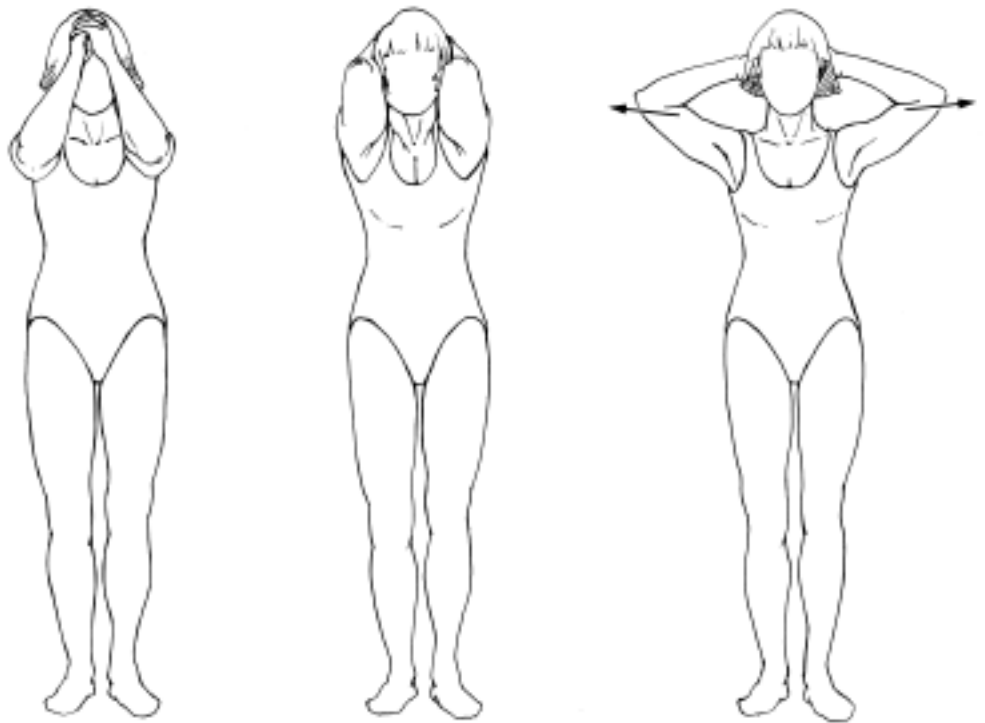
Clasp, Lift, and Stretch

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.

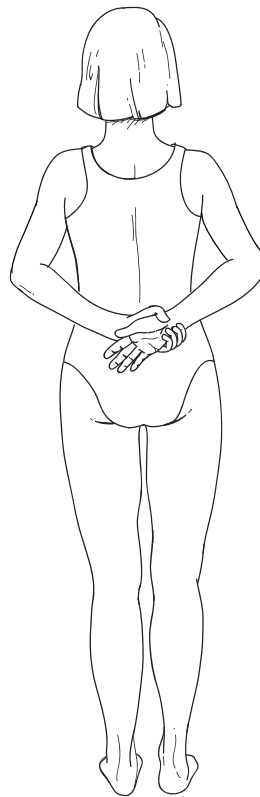
When one minute is up, slowly reverse the steps by bringing your elbows back in front and sliding your hands over your head. Slowly lower your arms.



Back Climb

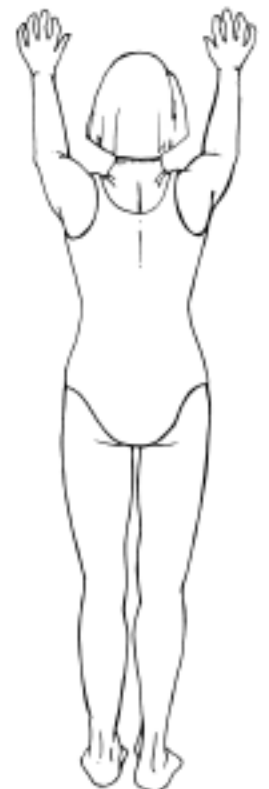
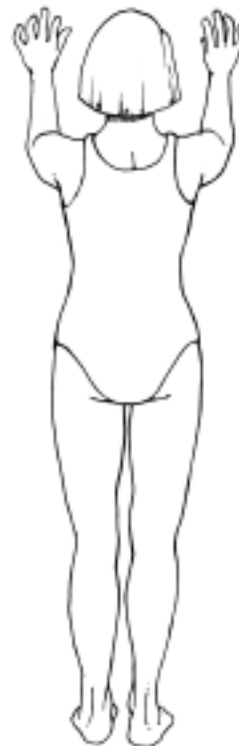
This exercise can be performed either sitting or standing. Place your hands behind your back grasping your involved hand. Slowly slide your hands up the center of your back as far as possible. Hold the highest position for one minute.

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.



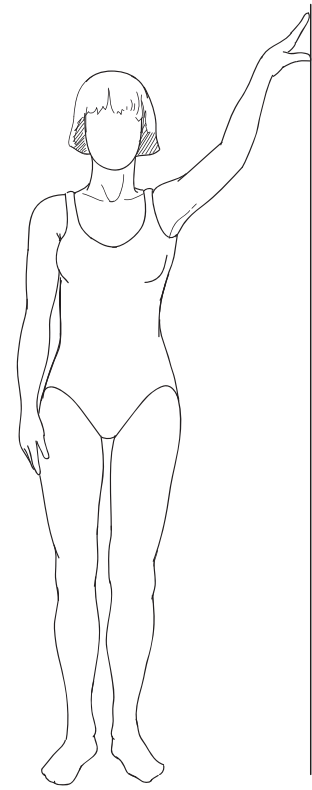
Wall Climb

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 uninjured side facing a wall, about one foot away from the wall. Reach up with your uninjured 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 injured 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.



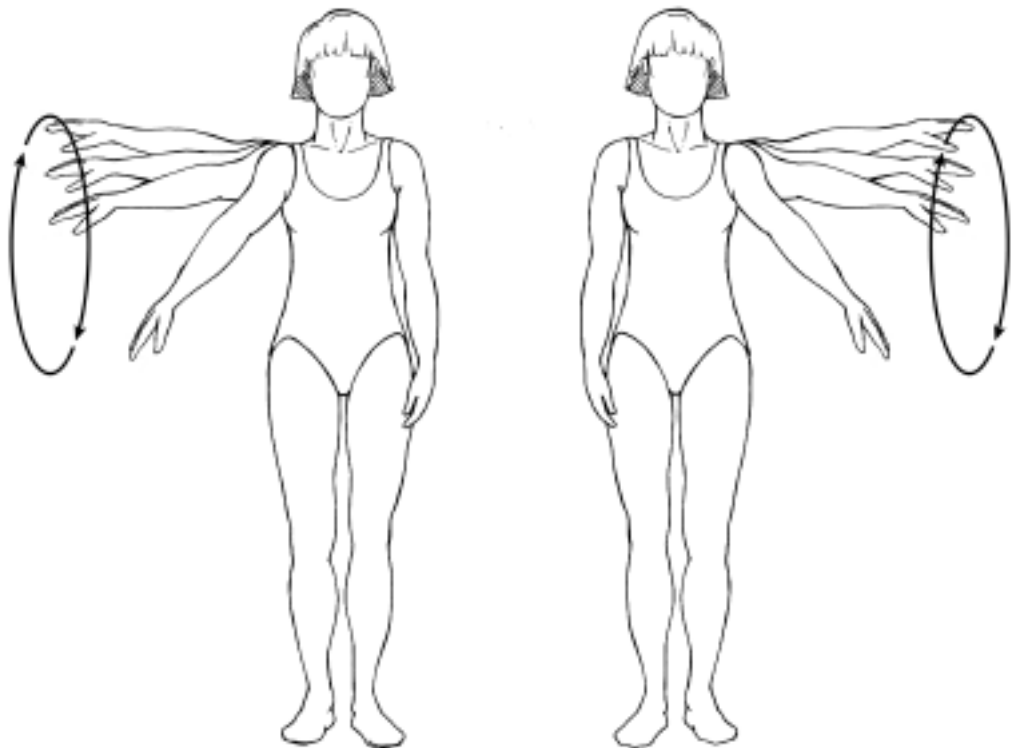
Arm Circles

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

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.



Swelling

After your surgery, you may have some swelling or puffiness in your hand or arm on the side of your surgery. This is normal and will usually resolve itself. If you notice swelling in your hand or arm, raise your arm above your head several times a day while you do hand pumps. Slowly open and close your fist 10 times.

You may also elevate your arm a few times a day for about 20 minutes. To elevate 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. Avoid holding your arm over your head for an extended time. This may cause the muscles of the arm to fatigue. 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 help gravity to drain the fluid out of the arm. If the swelling does not go down within 4 to 6 weeks, call your doctor or nurse.

If you have had axillary lymph nodes removed, the way fluid circulates in your arm may have changed, and you are at risk for developing 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. Current statistics show that 15 to 25 out of 100 people will develop lymphedema after having axillary lymph nodes removed. You will have a smaller risk for lymphedema after a sentinel lymph node biopsy. Current statistics show that only about 0 to 7 out of 100 people will develop lymphedema after this procedure. For more details, read the patient information card, *The Facts about Lymphedema and Breast Cancer*. You may also speak with your doctor or nurse about your particular risk for lymphedema.

Follow the hand and arm care guidelines your nurse will give you. They may help minimize the risk of infection or lymphedema. Your nurse will review them with you in the hospital if you are admitted or during your first post-operative visit.

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

