

# Recovering from breast surgery with exercises



After breast surgery, your arm movements may be limited. This fact sheet shows you what exercises you can do to regain your abilities faster.

## How will the exercises help me?

These movements will help you to:

- be able to move your arm and shoulder on the operated side as before (mobility)
- quickly resume your daily activities
- improve the circulation in your arm
- take the proper position if you have radiation therapy treatments (arm above the head)
- avoid complications, such as shoulder stiffness

## When should I start these exercises?

You should start doing them the day after your operation.

We recommend that you do them before your operation, too. This will allow you to get used to them and get a sense of what your normal arm movement feels like.



## I have a drain. Should I do the exercises anyway?

Yes, but it's important not to raise the elbow higher than the shoulder while you have the drain. This will avoid putting any stress on it. You will be able to do the exercises fully when you no longer have the drain.

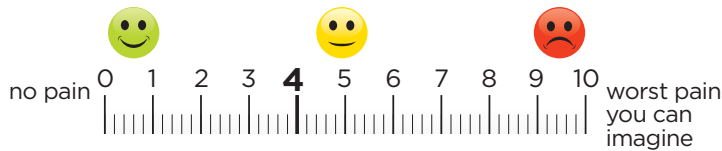
If the exercises cause the drain to leak, cut the number of repetitions by half. Later you can build up very gradually to the full set of repetitions.

## Will the exercises hurt me?

The exercises shouldn't hurt you. However, it's normal to feel a slight discomfort or stretching in the arm or armpit. This should go away within 30 to 45 minutes after the exercises. If you still feel any discomfort after this time, do fewer repetitions. Also, go slowly, and avoid making any sudden movements.

## Should I do the exercises if it hurts?

If you feel pain, you still need to do the exercises. Rate your pain on a scale of 0 to 10 before you start. If it's higher than 4, take painkillers 30 to 60 minutes before exercising. That will be more comfortable for you.



## Practical tips

- Relax before each exercise session.



- Don't hold your breath during the exercises.
- Go slow and respect your limits.

**Besides the exercises, you can slowly resume activities such as walking, cycling, or other activities you enjoy. If you're not sure about any activity, talk with your care team.**

## When should I stop doing the exercises?

Stop them when your arm mobility is back to normal. That is, when your arm moves the way it did before the operation.

## How many times a day should I do the exercises?

It's best to do them 1 to 3 times a day. Repeat each movement 5 to 10 times. Increase the number of repetitions gradually.

## How should I do my exercises?

The recommended exercises are presented in Appendices 1 and 2. Take your time, breathe, and avoid sudden movements.

## Who should I contact for help or to ask questions?

If you have questions, call your nurse or your surgeon. They will refer you for physiotherapy if needed.



### USEFUL RESOURCES

Canadian Cancer Society: *Exercises after Breast Surgery*:

> [cancer.ca/en](https://cancer.ca/en)

At the bottom of the page, under About Us, click on Resource Publications

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.





You can also find them on our web site [chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante](https://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)

*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*



To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
[chumontreal.qc.ca](https://chumontreal.qc.ca)

## APPENDIX 1 : EXERCISES TO START THE DAY AFTER YOUR OPERATION



### Exercise for circulation

Starting position	Action
 <p>Sitting or lying down. Arm of the operated side resting on pillows, a foam ball in your hand.</p>	 <p>Squeeze the ball, then squeeze it more and release.</p>



### Correcting your posture

Starting position	Action
 <p>Standing or sitting on a stool. Shoulders relaxed and elbows unfolded.</p>	 <p>Back view</p> <p>Side view</p> <p>Gently move your shoulder blades toward each other. Hold for 10 to 15 seconds, then release.</p>

## Head movement

Starting position	Action
 <p>Standing, arms hanging down. Or sitting, with your arm on the operated side resting on a pillow.</p>	 <p>1 - Bend your head forward.</p> <p>2 - Bend your head to each side.</p> <p>3 - Turn your head from side to side.</p> <p>After each movement, bring your head back to a straight position.</p>

## Shoulder roll

Starting position	Action
 <p>Standing or sitting, arms hanging down.</p>	 <p>Backwards rotations: Lift your shoulders up, rotate them towards your back (moving your shoulder blades closer together), then close the circle by bringing them up towards the front again.</p> <p>Then reverse the movement, making circles towards the front.</p>

## Shoulder flexion with a stick

### Starting position



Lying on your back, knees bent, or standing or sitting. Holding a stick in your hands at shoulder width.

### Action



Lift the stick to shoulder height. Hold the position for 5 seconds, then bring it back down.

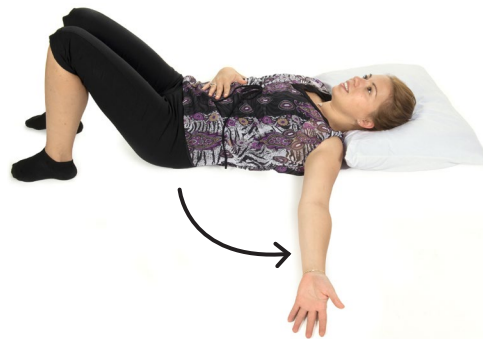
## Shoulder abduction

### Starting position



Lying on your back, knees bent. Arm alongside your body, palm facing upwards.

### Action



Slide the arm along the floor to shoulder height. Keep the palm of your hand facing the ceiling and your elbow straight. Hold this position for 3 to 5 seconds and then bring the arm back alongside your body.

### Previous exercises



Exercise for circulation



Shoulder flexion with a stick



Shoulder abduction

Continue doing these 3 exercises, raising the arms above shoulder level.

### Pectoral stretch

#### Starting position



Lying on your back, with a towel folded under your head and with knees bent, or sitting. Hands joined behind the neck, elbows towards the front of the body.

#### Action



Move your elbows towards the back of your neck until you feel a stretch in the upper chest and shoulders. Hold the position for 10 to 20 seconds. Then return to the starting position.

**This position is similar to that taken during radiotherapy treatments.**

## Stretching the thoracic cage

### Starting position



Standing or sitting (if sitting, your feet should be flat on the floor).

### Action



Raise your arm on the operated side above your head and lean your torso towards the opposite side. Hold the position for 10 to 20 seconds. Then return to the starting position and release fully.

## Internal shoulder rotation

### Starting position



Standing, back straight, a towel in your hands. The hand on the operated side placed on your lower back, the other behind your neck.

### Action



With the top hand, pull the towel as high as possible. Hold the position for 3 to 5 seconds, then release. Keep your back very straight.

### Abdominal breathing - to relax after your exercises



Lying on your back or side, arm on the operated side resting on pillows.

Take deep abdominal breaths: inhale through your nose while expanding your belly, then exhale slowly through your mouth, letting your belly deflate slowly.