

Recovering from breast reconstruction with exercises

Latissimus dorsi flap



After breast reconstruction surgery with a latissimus dorsi flap, your arm movements may be limited. This fact sheet presents some exercises that will help you recover your abilities faster.

How will these exercises help me?

These movements will help you to:

- > Move your arm and shoulder on the operated side as before (mobility). You will need to take certain precautions during the first 3 weeks (4 weeks if an implant was added).
- > Quickly resume your daily activities.
- > Activate the blood flow in your arm.
- > Take the required position if you have radiation therapy treatments (arms above your head).
- > Avoid complications such as stiffness in the shoulder.

When should I start these exercises?

Try them before your breast reconstruction, so that you can get used to your exercises and know how mobile your arm is normally.

After the surgery, start the exercises as soon as you get home.

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

Yes, but it's important not to raise your elbow higher than your shoulder, to avoid pulling on the drain. You can do the full range of exercises after the drain is out (unless otherwise specified).

If the exercises make the drain leak more, do only half of the repetitions for each exercise. Then increase the number of repetitions gradually.

Are there any precautions I should take after the surgery?

For a good recovery, you should:

- sleep on your back with your torso elevated to a 30 degree angle for 1 week
- don't lean on your operated arm when getting up from a resting position for 1 week
- don't raise your arm higher than your shoulder for the first 3 weeks

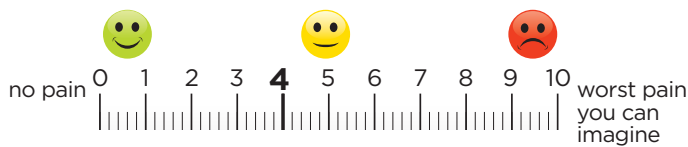


Is it normal to feel pain when doing the exercises?

The exercises shouldn't hurt. But it's normal to feel a slight discomfort or stretching in the arm, armpit, breast, or back. This should go away within 30 to 45 minutes after the exercises. If not, do fewer repetitions, go slowly, and avoid sudden movements.

Should I do the exercises if it hurts?

Yes, because you'll recover more quickly. But first assess your pain. If it's more than 4 on a scale of 0 to 10, take painkillers 30 to 60 minutes before exercising.



Practical tips

- > Relax before each exercise session. Don't hold your breath during the exercises. Breathe normally.
- > Go slowly and respect your limits.

Besides doing the exercises suggested here, you can gradually resume your activities. Don't hesitate to walk. You can get back to your normal daily activities starting in the 5th week after your surgery.

When can I start doing sports again?

You can go back to your sports activities 8 weeks after the surgery, unless otherwise advised by your surgeon.

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, gradually increasing the number of repetitions.

How should I do my exercises?

The exercises are presented in the appendix. Take your time and avoid sudden movements. Take deep breaths.

When should I stop doing the exercises?

When your arm moves as well as it did before the surgery.

Do I need to take care of my scars?

Yes. Beginning in the 3rd week after the surgery, you can start massaging your scars if the bandages (Steri-Strips) are removed. Consult the fact sheet [Taking care of my scars with massage](#).

Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

You can call the CHUM Physiotherapy Service after your surgery.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Quebec Breast Cancer Foundation:

> rubanrose.org/en

The Quebec Breast Cancer Foundation is proud to help inform and support women going through breast reconstruction, thanks to a grant for this project.

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

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


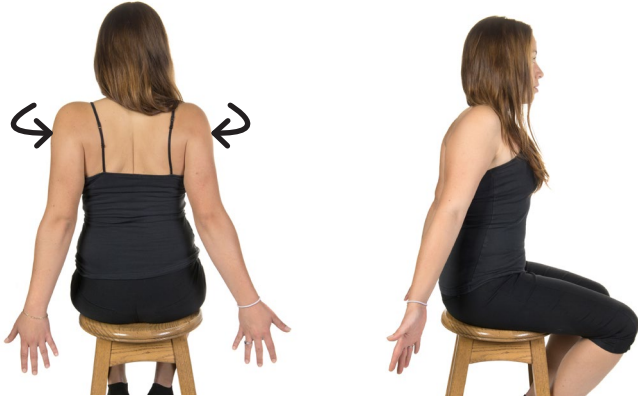
APPENDIX 1: EXERCISES FOR THE FIRST 3 OR 4 WEEKS AFTER SURGERY

Start doing these exercises when you get home. Do them 1 to 3 times a day, repeating each movement 5 to 10 times. Increase the number of repetitions little by little. **Important: breathe normally during the exercises. After 3 weeks (or 4, if you also had an implant), move on to the exercises in Appendix 2.**

Circulation exercise

Starting position	Action
 <p>Sitting or lying down. The arm on the operated side resting on a pillow, and a foam ball in your hand.</p>	 <p>Squeeze the ball, then squeeze harder, and release.</p>

Correcting your posture

Starting position	Action
 <p>Standing or sitting with your back straight. 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>

External rotation

Starting position



Standing or sitting with your back straight. Shoulders relaxed, elbows bent at a 90 degree angle.

Action





With elbows bent 90 degrees and your upper arms against your body, turn your forearms outward, as if you were opening a door. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds, then return to the starting position.





Remember:

- > Don't hold your breath during the exercises.
- > Keep breathing normally.
- > Go little by little and respect your limits.

Head movements

Starting position	Action
 <p data-bbox="151 785 591 884">Standing, arms by your sides. Or sitting, with the arm on the operated side resting on a pillow.</p>	 <ol data-bbox="630 779 1466 877" style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Bend your head forward 2 Bend your head to each side. 3 Turn your head from side to side. <p data-bbox="630 921 1442 953">After each movement, bring your head back to the centre.</p>

Shoulder rolls

Starting position	Action
 <p data-bbox="151 1698 586 1759">Standing or sitting, arms by your sides.</p>	 <p data-bbox="630 1698 1438 1833">With your shoulders, make backward circles: lift your shoulders, rotate them toward your back (bringing your shoulder blades closer together), then complete the circle by bringing them up toward the front again.</p> <p data-bbox="630 1850 1125 1881">Then make circles toward 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



Raise the stick **90 degrees maximum (making sure the elbows don't go above shoulder level)**. Hold for 5 seconds, then lower the stick.

Use your good arm to help raise the arm on the operated side.

Shoulder abduction

Starting position



Lying on your back, knees bent. One arm alongside your body, palm facing upward, the other hand on your abdomen.

Action



Slide the arm on the side upward to **90 degrees maximum (making sure the elbow doesn't go above shoulder level)**. Keep the palm of your hand facing the ceiling and your elbow straight. Hold for 3 to 5 seconds and then bring the arm back alongside your body.

APPENDIX 2: EXERCISES TO START 3 TO 4 WEEKS AFTER SURGERY

If you also had an implant, wait until the 4th week after surgery to start these exercises. (Meanwhile, you can continue the exercises in Appendix 1.) Do them until your arm moves as well as it did before.

Previous exercises



Circulation exercise



Shoulder flexion with a stick



Shoulder abduction

Continue doing these 3 exercises, raising the arms above shoulder level, until your mobility is back to what it was before. Remember to keep breathing normally during your exercises.

Pectoral stretch

Starting position



Lying on your back with knees bent, or sitting with your back straight. Hands joined behind the neck, elbows toward the front of the body.

Action



Move your elbows toward the back until you feel a stretch in your upper chest and shoulders. Hold for 10 to 20 seconds.

This is the position taken during radiation therapy treatments.

Rib cage stretch

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 toward the opposite side. Hold for 10 to 20 seconds. Then return to the starting position.

Internal shoulder rotation

Starting position



Standing, back straight, holding a towel in your hands, with the hand of the operated side on your lower back, the other behind your neck.



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

Abdominal breathing - To relax after the 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, gradually letting your belly go flat.



Questions

Write down any questions you want to ask your care team so you don't forget anything.





Observations - Comments

Write down observations you feel are important: your symptoms, treatments, follow-up, energy level, spirit, etc.





Upcoming appointments



Resource people and contacts

Write down phone numbers, email addresses and websites that could be useful.





Pain management

Use this chart to:

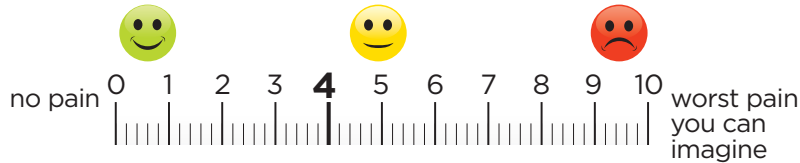
- keep track of your pain level (on the scale)
- keep track of what's done to relieve your pain
- note the effects on your pain (on the scale)



Examples

Date / Time	Pain (level)	Activity, medication, etc...	Comments (effects on pain, etc.)
2-05, 9 p.m.	7	2 Tylenols	A bit better. Pain = 5/10
12-05, 9:30 p.m.	5	Relaxation - reading	Feeling better. Pain = 3/10

Pain scale



You want to keep your pain level at 4 or lower. Unrelieved pain will be harder to control.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal chumontreal.qc.ca

