

Exercises After Breast and Axillary Surgery

There are many types of surgeries to treat breast cancer or cancers that affect the axillary (underarm) lymph nodes:

- Lumpectomy, also known as partial mastectomy or breast conservation surgery
- Mastectomy
- Breast reconstruction, except for DIEP flap reconstructions (PT will go over exercises with you)
- Sentinel lymph node biopsy
- Axillary lymph node dissection

No matter what type of surgery, you will need to do certain exercises afterward to get your arm and shoulder moving again.

You may start the first exercise set (**initial exercises**) the day after surgery. You may begin the second exercise set (**advanced exercises**) about a week after surgery or when your drains have been removed.

Initial Exercises

When you start these exercises, avoid sharp pain, stretching the incisions, or pulling on your drains. Move into each stretch to the point of tension, but not sharp pain. You should easily be able to take a deep breath while stretching.

Do these exercises for about 1 week. Then progress to the advanced exercises. Exercise daily after surgery until you have full movement of your arm. Keep doing any of the initial exercises that provide a good stretch. Start with 3 repetitions of each exercise twice a day. Slowly increase to 10 repetitions each by the end of the first week. Exercise so you feel a good stretch under your arm and hold at that point for a slow count of 5-10.

Warm Up

Do these exercises with your arm raised above the heart on pillows (the first few days after surgery).

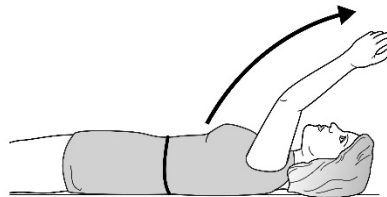
1. Fist squeeze, wrist circles, elbow bends 15-20 times each. This will help move lymph fluid out of your arm.

Lying on Back

Move your arm as far as you comfortably can within each of these directions.

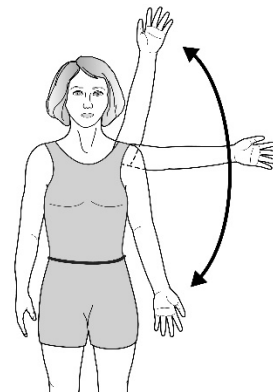
Forward arm lifts:

1. Lie on your back with your arm at your side.
2. Lift it forward and up, keeping your elbow straight until your hand is over your head.
3. Return slowly to your side.



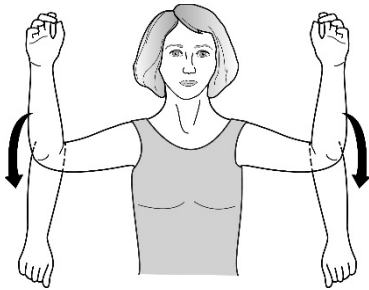
Sideways arm lifts:

1. Lie on your back with your arm at your side.
2. With elbow straight and palm up, raise arm sideways keeping arm in contact with the bed.
3. Return slowly to your side.



Windshield wipers:

1. Lie on your back with your arm straight out from your side (shoulder level).
2. Bend your elbow and point fingers toward the ceiling.
3. Roll your arm forward until your palm rests on the bed.
4. Roll your arm back, trying to rest the back of your hand on the bed beside your head.



Sitting

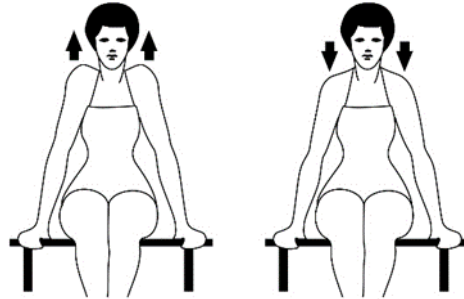
Shoulder blade squeeze (this exercise helps to move your shoulder blade):

1. Facing straight ahead, sit in a chair in front of a mirror. Do not rest against the back of the chair.
2. Your arms should be at your sides with your elbows bent.
3. Squeeze your shoulder blades together, bringing your elbows behind you. Keep your shoulders level. Do not lift your shoulders up toward your ears.



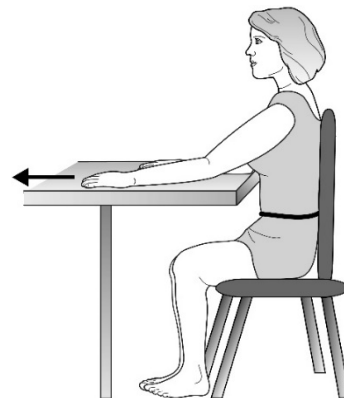
Shoulder shrugs:

1. Sit up and straight
2. Squeeze shoulders upward toward your ears.
3. Hold for a few seconds, and then relax.



Shoulder blade stretch (this exercise also helps to move your shoulder blade):

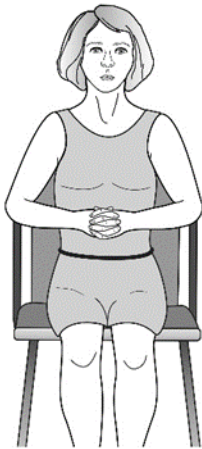
1. Sit in a chair very close to a table with your back against the back of the chair.
2. Place the unaffected arm on the table with your elbow bent and palm down. Do not move this arm during the exercise.
3. Place the affected arm on the table, palm down, with your elbow straight.
4. Without moving your trunk, slide the affected arm forward, across the table. You should feel your shoulder blade move as you do this. Now bring your arm back to the starting position, squeezing your shoulder blade.



Chest Wall Stretches

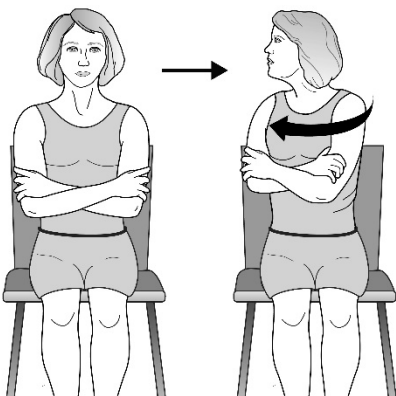
Deep breathing:

1. Sit up straight with your hands on your stomach.
2. Take a slow deep breath, inhaling through your nose.
3. Allow your stomach to rise and breath out through your mouth.
4. Try to expand your chest and rib cage as you inhale (exaggerate the motion).



Neck and shoulder stretch:

1. Turn your head to look over your shoulder.
2. Rotate your head **and** shoulders.
3. Complete on both sides.



Trunk side bend:

1. Stand with legs apart, hands resting at side.
2. Tighten belly muscles.
3. Slide hand along outside of thigh towards knee on affected side.
4. Return to stand up straight.
5. Repeat on other side.



Advanced Exercises

You can do these exercises one arm at a time. Progress to these exercises after about a week or after your drains are removed.

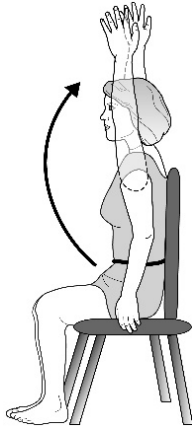
Apron strings:

1. Sit up straight.
2. Clasp your hands together behind your back as though you were tying apron strings.
3. Slowly lift your hands toward your shoulder blades.
4. Pull your shoulders back to feel chest stretch.



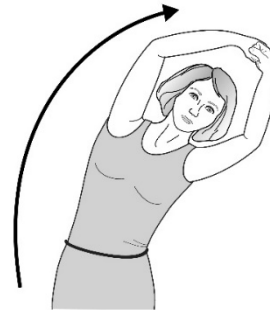
Forward arm lifts:

1. Sit up straight.
2. Raise your arm forward with your elbow straight while waving your wrist goodbye.
3. Lower your arms and relax them at your sides.



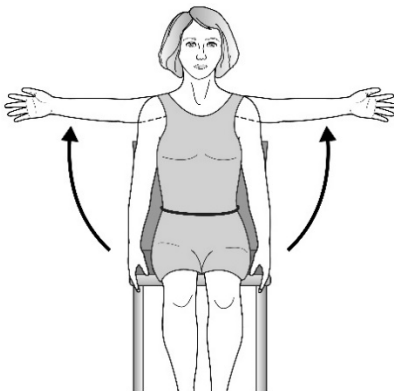
Tree sway:

1. Stand up straight.
2. Clasp your hands in front of your body. Slowly raise your arms in front of you until you feel tension or a stretch. Hold for 2-3 seconds.
3. Once you can reach overhead, then lean towards your affected side, getting an underarm stretch.
4. Repeat this exercise but lean towards the unaffected side.



Sideways arm lifts:

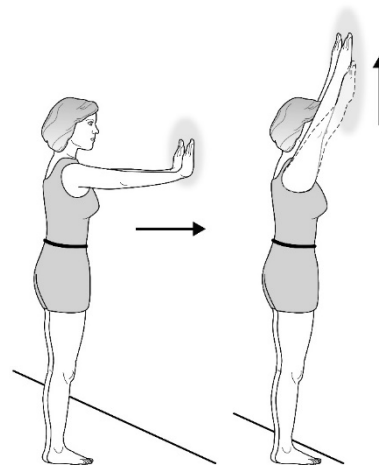
1. Sit up straight.
2. Raise both arms out sideways to shoulder level.
3. Raise your arm to the side with your elbow straight while waving your wrist goodbye.
4. Keep your head straight.
5. Lower your arms and relax them at your sides.



Wall forward stretch (complete one arm at a time):

Part 1:

1. Facing the wall, stand with your feet a comfortable distance from the wall.
2. Place your palm on the wall at shoulder level.
3. Gently pushing into wall, slowly walk your hand up the wall until you feel a good stretch, hold for 10 seconds.



Part 2:

1. Then with your hand in place on the wall, turn your body away from the wall opening your chest into a stretch.
2. **Only** move until you feel a stretch, not pain.

Guidelines

Follow lifting guidelines from your surgeon. Avoid heavy lifting. Do not vacuum for several weeks. Lifting light objects in your daily routine can help you to regain strength.

When you have full movement of your shoulder, and you can do 10 repetitions of the advanced exercises easily, you may begin to add light resistance exercises.

- You may choose to keep doing the prescribed exercises, adding a one pound weight. When you can easily complete 3 sets of 10 repetitions, you may increase the weight slowly.
- If you still have tightness in your chest wall or under arm area, you should do the shoulder and chest wall stretches to prevent further stiffness or tightening of your tissue.

If you will have radiation, keep stretching daily to maintain your range of motion for up to 18 months.

Who to Call

If you need a referral, here is a list of the clinics with therapists who are trained to help you after breast and/or underarm surgery:

UW Health**University Hospital**

600 Highland Ave, E3/211

Madison, WI 53792

(608) 263-8060 Phone

(608) 262-7679 Fax

UW Health**Hand Clinic**

1 South Park Street

Madison, WI 53715

(608) 890-6170 Phone

(608) 890-6718 Fax

UW Health**Yahara Rehabilitation Clinic**

1050 East Broadway

Monona WI, 53716

608-890-6110 clinic scheduler

608-221-6253 voice mail

608-221-6250 fax

UW Health**The American Center**

4602 Eastpark Blvd.

Madison, WI 53718

(608) 263-7540 Phone

If you are a patient receiving care at UnityPoint – Meriter, Swedish American or a health system outside of UW Health, please use the phone numbers provided in your discharge instructions for any questions or concerns.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 3/2020 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#7823