



# Physiotherapy after breast reconstruction surgery using a TMG flap

This leaflet gives you advice about recovering from breast reconstruction surgery and returning to normal everyday activities. It explains exercises you should do each day, things to look out for and some general advice about your recovery.

This leaflet is suitable for people who have had:

- Breast reconstruction surgery using a transverse myocutaneous gracilis flap
- With additional axillary lymph node sample/clearance
- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy

If you have not had breast reconstruction surgery using tissue from your thigh, this is not the correct leaflet for you. You will need to follow a different exercise plan. Please contact your breast care nurse or physiotherapist.

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Please use the information in this leaflet as a general guide. If you have any specific concerns/questions, or medical issues particularly with your lungs or heart, please speak to a health care professional before undertaking any forms of physical activity.

If, after leaving hospital, you notice any sudden changes in the colour, texture, temperature or size of your breast, or affected arm, you should contact your breast care nurse as soon as you can.

# Early recovering advice

## Important information: days one to seven after your operation

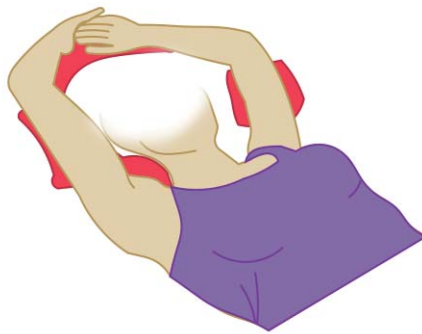
- Do not lift your operated arm(s) above shoulder height. This is to protect the new blood supply to your breast(s).
- Do not push or pull excessively with the operated arm(s).
- Consider the position of your drains while resting in bed. You may also find it more comfortable to rest a pillow under the knee, on the operated side.
- When you first get out of bed a healthcare professional will be present to assist you. When sitting on the edge of the bed, before standing, sit in a perched position only.
- Walk as much as you are able to. You may find shuffle walking more comfortable.
- Ask your physiotherapist to practice stairs with you prior to discharge if you have any concerns.
- You will be guided by your surgeons when you can start to sit out of bed in a chair. You can begin by sitting out for 10 minutes periods, 3-4 days following surgery. Slowly increase this time, and by discharge, or once your drain(s) has been removed, you should be sitting normally.

# Benefits of exercise

## Why do I need to exercise after my surgery?

**It is important that you follow the exercise plan in this leaflet because it will:**

- prevent shoulder stiffness and help you to regain full movement and function to your shoulder
- encourage your circulation and therefore help your scars/breast to heal
- improve symptoms of tightness and cording
- prevent or ease any hip or knee pain/stiffness
- encourage mobility and strength
- help to reduce the risk of lymphoedema
- if needed, help you to get into the required position for radiotherapy (see picture below).



You will not routinely be seen by a physiotherapist following discharge from hospital. However, if you wish to see a physiotherapist, then please ask your nurse/doctor to let us know, or contact us directly on **020 7188 9654** (9am – 4.30pm). If you are worried about any symptoms following your surgery please speak to your breast care nurse, doctor or physiotherapist.

## **How much exercise should I do?**

Once discharged, you should try to do the exercises in this booklet every day. We recommend that you do five repetitions of each exercise and practice this four times a day. You shouldn't feel any pain when doing the exercises although a stretching or pulling sensation is normal. You should move as much as you feel able - the more you do the exercises, the easier they should become.

Always do the warm up/cool down exercises at the start and end of each session respectively, to help avoid injury and prevent stiffness. If you become concerned about the movement at your shoulder(s), or level of discomfort you are experiencing, please speak to your breast care nurse or physiotherapist.

## **How long shall I do the exercises for?**

Arm stiffness and weakness can persist for some time following surgery and radiotherapy, so it is important to exercise regularly. If you have just had surgery, keep doing the exercises until your shoulder movement has returned to normal (the movement you had before your operation). If you are going to have radiotherapy, keep doing the exercises throughout radiotherapy, and then for as long as you are still experiencing tightness and stiffness afterwards.

Please talk to your breast care nurse or physiotherapist if you are unsure how long to keep exercising after your treatment, or if you have any concerns about your recovery.

## Reasons to stop exercising

Stop exercising and speak to your doctor or breast care nurse if you have:

- a seroma (a collection of fluid under the arm, in the breast, or chest wall)
- a wound infection or healing issues
- worsening pain.

It is important to restart the exercises again as soon as possible, however please follow the advice of your health care professional.

Remember some swelling is a normal reaction to surgery and a natural stage of how your body heals. However if you are concerned, please do contact your breast care nurse.

## Your exercise plan

There are two stages to your exercise plan

**Stage 1** Start these exercises **four to seven days** (i.e. when discharged), after your operation on the \_\_\_\_\_. Continue for one week.

**Stage 2** Start these exercises **two weeks** after your operation on the \_\_\_\_\_. Continue until your arm feels back to normal, or until approximately three-four weeks after completing radiotherapy.

### **Second week after surgery**

Perform the warm up exercises, stage 1 exercises, and cool down.

### **Third week and beyond**

Do the warm up, stage 2 exercises and cool down.

These timings are meant as a guide and you should complete the exercises at your own pace. Please seek advice from your breast care nurse or physiotherapist if you have any concerns.

Link the exercises with something you do every day (such as mealtimes) and they will soon become part of your routine. We recommend you do these exercises with both of your arms. You may however choose to do them on your operated side only.

## **Warm up/cool down exercises**

Do exercises 1 and 2 to warm up before you do any other exercises in this leaflet. Repeat them to cool down after completing any exercises. You can do them standing up or sitting down.

### **Exercise 1 – Shoulder shrug**

Keep your arms loose and relaxed by your sides. Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears and lower gently back down.

**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



### **Exercise 2 – Shoulder circling**

Keep your arms loose and relaxed by your sides. Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears, then circle them back and down.

**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**





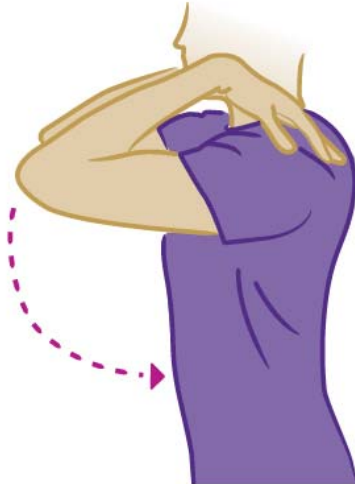
## Stage 1 exercises

Start these exercises four to seven days after your operation. Continue for one week. You can do them sitting down or standing up. Remember to warm up first. In these exercises, do not raise your arms above shoulder level (90 degrees).

### Exercise 3 – Bent arm forwards

Bend your elbows and rest your hands lightly on your shoulders. Raise both your arms upwards and forwards so they are at right angles to your body. Lower your elbows slowly, then raise them again to repeat.

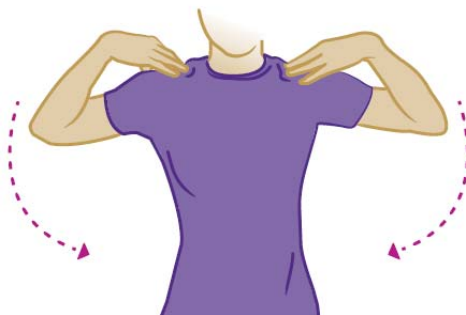
**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



#### **Exercise 4 – Bent arm sideways**

Bend your elbows and rest your hands lightly on your shoulders. Raise both your arms out to the side so they are at right angles to your body. Lower your elbows slowly, then raise them again to repeat.

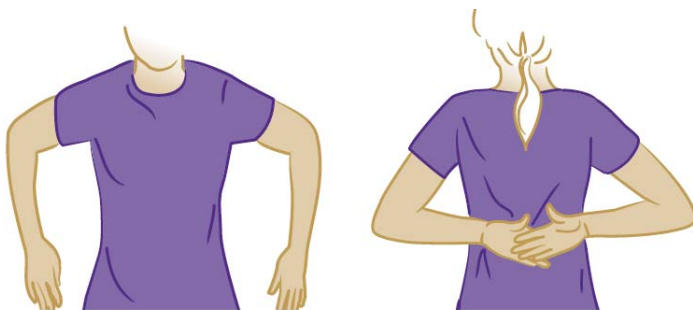
**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



#### **Exercise 5 – Back scratching**

Hold your arms out to the sides and bend your elbows. Slowly reach up behind your back to just under your shoulder blades. Then slowly lower your arms back down to your sides.

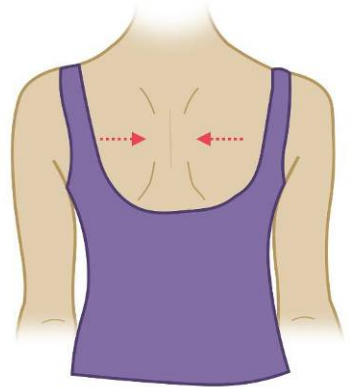
**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



### **Exercise 6 – Shoulders back**

Keeping your arms by your side, push your shoulder blades forwards, and then pull your shoulder blades back – squeezing your shoulder blades together.

**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



### **Exercise 7 – Walking**

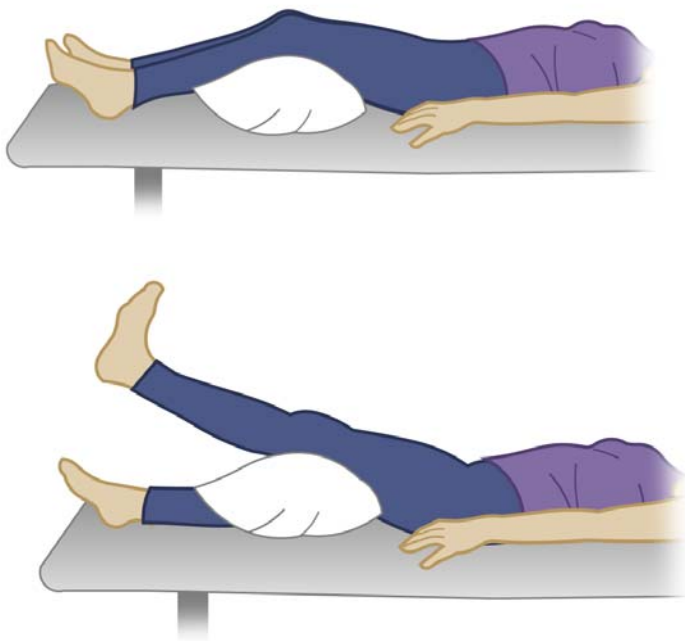
Aim to do walk as much as your feel comfortable to. This will help your scars heal and reduced stiffness around your hips and pelvis.



### **Exercise 8 – Knee strengthening**

Lie on your back. Place a pillow under your knee. Pull your foot and toes up, while tightening your thigh muscle and straightening your knee. Hold 5 seconds and relax.

**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



If you develop a seroma please discuss your exercise plan with your breast care nurse, surgeon or physiotherapist.

## Stage 2 exercises

Start these exercises in the **third week** after your operation (or after you have had your drain(s) removed). Continue until your arm feels back to normal, or until approximately three-four weeks after completing radiotherapy. Remember to warm up and cool down, and if you experience any issues with swelling, pain or infection, please speak to your surgeon or breast care nurse.

### Exercise 9 – Arm lifts

Lying on your back, with head supported, take three to four deep breaths to relax your shoulders. Clasp your hands together, or hold onto a stick or broom. Keep your elbows straight and lift your arms up and over your head as far as you can to feel a mild stretch. Hold and count to ten, and then slowly lower. If you have difficulty lying down, you can do this exercise sitting down.

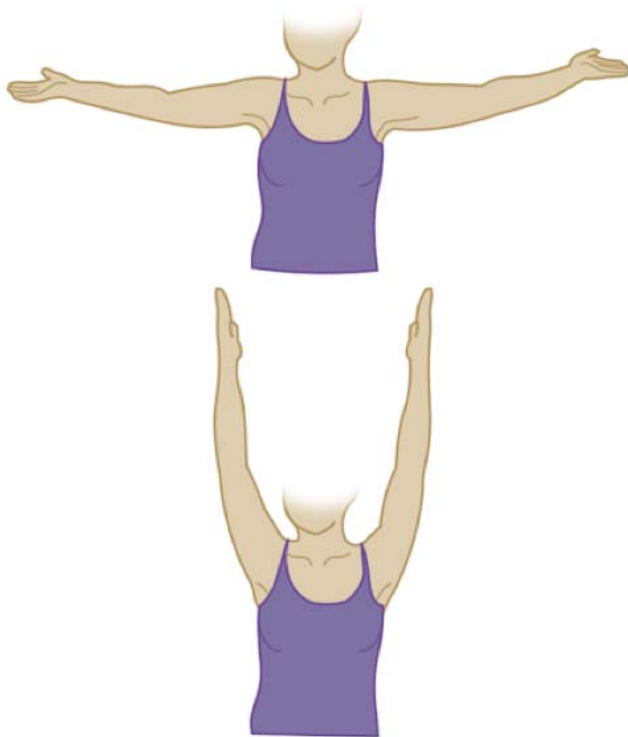
**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



## **Exercise 10 – Side arm lifts**

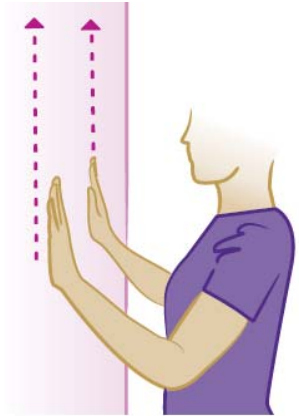
With your elbows straight, raise your arms outwards from your sides, with your palms facing up. Continue raising your arms out to the side until your fingers point to the ceiling, and then slowly lower them back to your sides.

**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



### **Exercise 11 – Wall climbing**

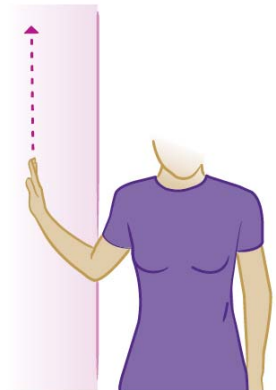
With your feet apart, stand facing a wall. Place both hands on the wall, at shoulder level. Facing forwards, gradually work your hands up the wall, sliding them or using your fingers to climb. Go up as far as you can to feel a stretch but not pain. Aim to get your elbows as straight as you can. Hold and count to ten. Then slowly lower arms to shoulder height before repeating the exercise.



**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**

### **Exercise 12 – Sideways wall climbing**

Stand sideways to the wall with your affected side nearest the wall. Put your hand on the wall at shoulder level. Gradually work your hand up the wall, sliding it or using your fingers to climb. Go up as far as you can to feel a stretch but not pain. Aim to get your elbow as straight as you can. Hold and count to ten. Then slowly lower arm to shoulder height before repeating the exercise.



**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**

### **Exercise 13 – Elbow push**

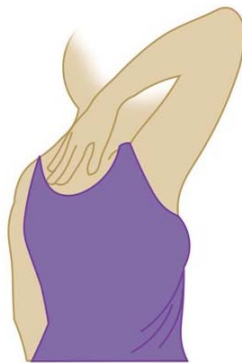
Lying on your back with your hands behind your head and your elbows out to the sides. Gently push your elbows downwards into the bed, or floor, as far as is comfortable. Hold and count to ten. Relax and then repeat.



**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**

### **Exercise 14 – Upper back scratch**

Bend your elbow and rest your hand lightly on your shoulder. Reach your hand down your back towards your shoulder blades to feel a stretch under your arm. Then slower lower your arm back down to your side. Repeat on other arm as needed.



**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



### **Exercise 15 – Walking**

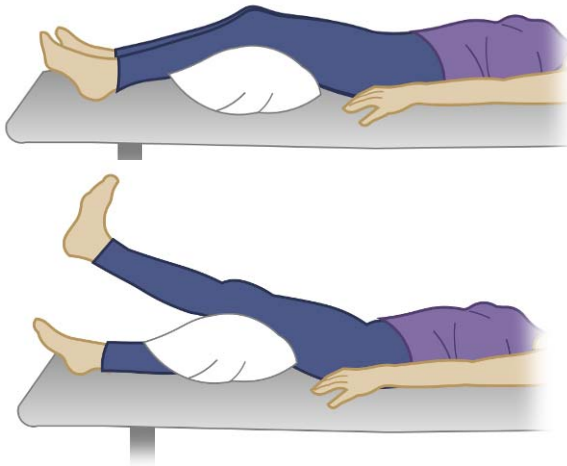
Aim to do walk as much as your feel comfortable to. This will help your scars heal and reduced stiffness around your hips and pelvis.



### **Exercise 16 – Knee strengthening**

Lying on your back. Place a pillow under your knee. Pull your foot and toes up, while tightening your thigh muscle and straightening your knee. Hold 5 seconds and relax.

**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



If you develop a seroma please discuss your exercise plan with your breast care nurse, surgeon or physiotherapist.

## Additional exercise programme

Eight weeks following your surgery (if all wounds are fully healed) you can progress on to more difficult exercises for your hip, knee and core muscles (see below).

These exercises will help to build up the strength around your pelvic, core, hips and knees and will also help to release any ongoing tightness.

### Exercise 1 – Thigh strengthening

Sitting or standing. Place a pillow or ball in between your knees. Squeeze your thighs together, hold 10 seconds and relax.

Do as many as you feel that you can – five to ten repetitions is a good starting point.



## **Exercise 2 – Sitting and standing**

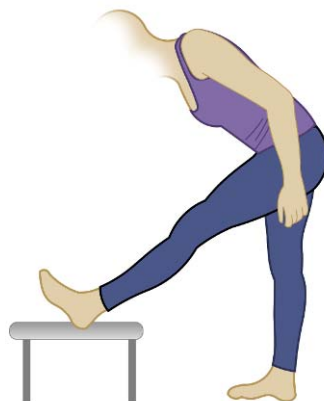
Sitting in a chair with supported back and arm rests as required. Slowly practice standing up, and sitting down.

Do as many as you feel that you can – five to ten repetitions is a good starting point.



### **Exercise 3 – Hip stretch**

Stand with the leg to be stretched resting on a low stool or bottom step. Holding onto a support as required. Keeping the knee straight, bend your ankle up to the ceiling, bend your upper body forwards from your hip, keeping your back straight. You should feel a stretch behind your knee and into your thigh. Hold 10 seconds and relax.



Do as many as you feel that you can – three repetitions is a good starting point.

### **Exercise 4 – Thigh stretch**

Lying or sitting. Cross one leg over the other straight leg. Push the knee of the bent leg down to feel a stretch in between your thighs. Hold 10 seconds and relax.

Do as many as you feel that you can – three repetitions is a good starting point.



## What can I do to aid my recovery?

Complete your exercises slowly and gently and **do not** do any painful stretches.

You should feel a gentle stretch when exercising, but not pain. If needed, we would recommend for you to take your pain killers (as prescribed) 30minutes before you exercise. It is important that you follow the instructions that come with your pain killers and that you do not take more than the recommended dose. If you have any questions regarding pain relief please contact your breast care nurse or doctor.

### **Cording**

Your exercises can help to reduce the risk of, and treat, cording.

You may notice some tight bands/cords that develop under your armpit, sometimes stretching down to your wrist. This is known as cording, but it is nothing to be concerned about. Some people develop cording and others do not. Exercise will help relieve these cords, so it is important to continue with your exercise programme if cording develops.

If you develop cording, please contact your physiotherapist on **020 7188 9654**, especially if you are imminently due to commence radiotherapy.

### **Seroma**

If you experience a seroma (pocket of swelling following surgery) please be guided by your health care professional regarding your exercise plan.

## **Massage**

Self massage can help with the recovery of your scars. Once your scars have fully healed, it is recommended to perform daily massage around your scars. When you feel ready, using your fingers, or the palm of your hand, press down gently on the tissue surrounding your scar and move the top layer of skin on the underlying layers in a circular motion. This will assist in softening the scar, by improving circulation to the area, and might also help to improve sensation.

Providing your scars have fully healed, you can continue to use your favourite creams to massage the area. However during, and for approximately four weeks following, radiotherapy you will be advised on which creams/ moisturiser to use on your skin.

## **Posture**

Your exercises can also help to maintain a good posture following your surgery.

## **Lifting and carrying**

Avoid heavy lifting and carrying, especially above shoulder height, for the first two to three weeks following your operation, or until your scars have healed. You can then gradually return to normal activities once you feel ready.

## **Repetitive tasks**

Take care with repetitive tasks such as sewing, typing, writing, dusting, vacuuming for the first two to three weeks following surgery, as they may increase swelling, or induce achiness or heaviness in the affected arm(s). Return to these activities gradually and ensure that you pace yourself with regular breaks.

## Returning to previous activities/ hobbies/ sport

Take gentle exercise, such as walking, immediately following your surgery.

This can help to maintain strength and fitness, reduce tiredness, and also aid recovery. It can also help to minimise potential side effects during chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Please contact a physiotherapist on **020 7188 9654** if you require guidance, or specific advice, about planning or commencing any form of physical activity.

### **8 - 12 weeks after surgery**

8 to 12 weeks after surgery you can begin to return to higher impact activity/exercise. Please contact your physiotherapist if you require guidance or specific advice.

### **Swimming**

Swimming is a great form of exercise; recently the advice on whether you can continue to swim during your treatment, specifically radiotherapy, has been updated. You should now be able to continue to swim during radiotherapy, however please speak to your health care professional for individual advice as required, and please do not swim until your scars are fully healed. With regards to swimming during chemotherapy, it is advisable to check with your oncologist. Remember to pace your return to sports/exercise and set yourself achievable and realistic targets.

## **Pilates and yoga**

These are excellent forms of activity following breast surgery.

We recommend a gradual return to pilates/yoga, however you should not attempt any pilates or yoga positions where you weight bear through your arms until approximately 8-12 weeks following surgery. After this time you should return to these activities gradually and not hold any static positions, through your arms, for longer than 10 seconds without a rest.

## **12 weeks after surgery**

12 weeks after your surgery you should have resumed normal levels of activity.

We recommend 150 minutes, per week, of moderate intensity activity (this can be broken down into shorter sessions to reach a total of 150 minutes). Remember to plan, pace and prioritise your activity and try to include a variety of activities to perform.

During moderate intensity exercise your heart rate and breathing rate should increase, and you might break a sweat, but you should still be able hold a conversation. To measure your breathing rate, imagine a scale of 0–10 where 0 is you breathing normally at rest and 10 is extreme breathlessness. Aim to reach 4/10 breathlessness, and this will equal achieving a moderate intensity of physical activity.



## Further considerations

### Driving

We recommend you do not drive until you feel confident that the seat belt sits comfortably across your chest wall, you can safely and confidently handle the gear stick/handbrake, and if in an emergency you had to perform an emergency stop that this would not cause you any harm or discomfort. You should check with your insurance company to make sure you are covered to start driving again as they may refuse to meet a claim if they feel you have driven too soon.

Please do not drive for 48 hours after your anaesthetic/operation and if you are taking painkillers please check with a pharmacist whether it is safe for you to drive. If you are not sure about when to resume driving, please visit your GP to check your progress.

### Returning to work

When you return to work will depend on what your job involves. A graded return to work is recommended but not essential, and should commence when you feel both physically and emotionally ready. Please ask a healthcare professional if you require any further information, advice or support.

Please check with your employer which sickness note they require. It is usually okay to self-certificate for up to seven days but if you are off work for a longer period you will need to see your GP for a certificate. We cannot supply certificates.

## Will I need more physiotherapy?

You may require further physiotherapy if:

- you have not regained full movement at your shoulder three to four weeks after your operation
- a shoulder restriction is causing you problems in your daily activities
- you have cording
- you are unable to reach the radiotherapy position
- you are having difficulty returning to your normal levels of physical activity
- your energy levels are low and/or you are suffering with fatigue

## How do I arrange more physiotherapy?

Please ask any health care professional to refer you to the oncology physiotherapy team

Alternatively please call the oncology physiotherapy team at Guys Hospital on **020 7188 9654** between 9am and 4.30pm Monday to Friday. If your call is answered by our answer machine please leave a message and we will call you back.

## Images in this leaflet

All images used with permission from Breast Cancer Care, and the Physiotherapy Department Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust. For more information and support, visit [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk) or call the free helpline on 0808 800 6000.

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns please contact the physiotherapy team on **020 7188 9654** (Monday to Friday, 9am to 4.30pm).

Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals offer a range of cancer-related information leaflets for patients and carers, available at [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/cancer-leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/cancer-leaflets). For information leaflets on other conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)

The logo for Dimbleby Cancer Care is a blue rounded rectangle with the text "Dimbleby Cancer Care" in white. The text is arranged in three lines: "Dimbleby" on the first line, "Cancer" on the second line, and "Care" on the third line.

**Dimbleby  
Cancer  
Care**

**Dimbleby Cancer Care** provides cancer support services for Guy's and St Thomas'. We have a drop-in information area staffed by specialist nurses and offer complementary therapies, psychological support and benefits advice for patients and carers.

Dimbleby Cancer Care is located in the Welcome Village of the Cancer Centre at Guy's. **t:** 020 7188 5918  
**e:** [DimblebyCancerCare@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:DimblebyCancerCare@gstt.nhs.uk)

## Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

## Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 (PALS)      **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints)      **e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

## Language and Accessible Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

**t:** 020 7188 8815      **e:** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

## NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

## Get involved : become a member of the Trust

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved.

**t:** 0800 731 0319      **e:** [members@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:members@gstt.nhs.uk)

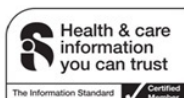
**w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership)

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