



# Physiotherapy after axillary surgery

**This leaflet gives you advice about recovering from axillary 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:

- Axillary lymph node sample/clearance
- Chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy

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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.

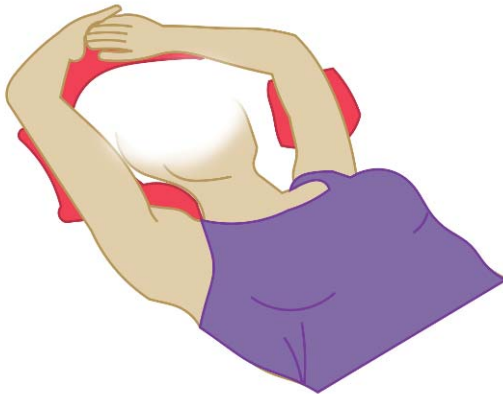
If, after leaving hospital, you notice any sudden changes in the colour, texture, temperature or size of your breast, or affected arm, you should contact your breast care nurse as soon as you can.

# 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 at your shoulder
- Encourage your circulation and therefore help your scar to heal
- Improve symptoms of tightness and cording
- 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 necessarily be seen by a physiotherapist following your surgery. 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?**

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 **one or two days** after your operation on the \_\_\_\_\_  
Continue for one week.

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

## First week after surgery

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

## Second 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.

**If you go home with a drain(s) in, continue stage one exercises for one week, or until the drain(s) has been removed. Then start stage two exercises.**

## **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.**



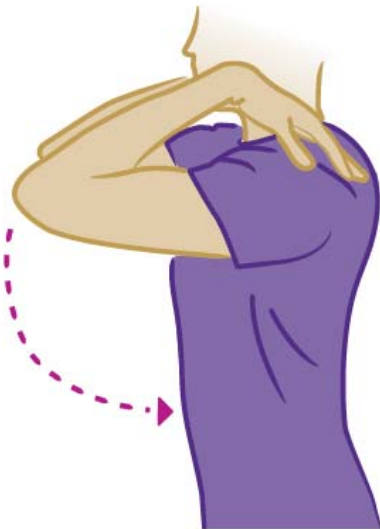
## Stage 1 exercises

Start these exercises **one or two 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.**

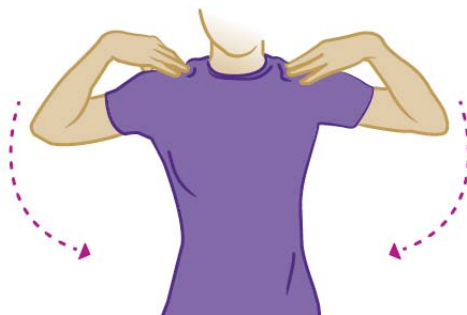




#### **Exercise 4 – Bent arm sideways**

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.

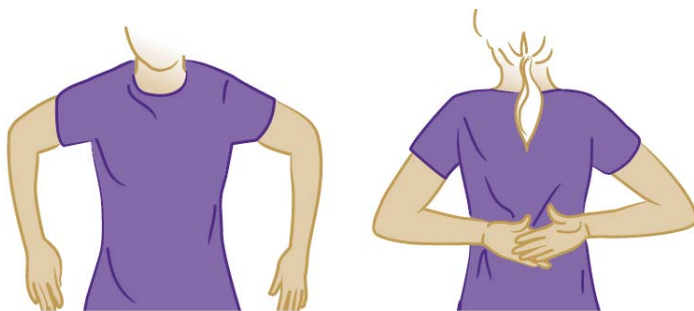
**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



#### **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 – Winging it**

Place your hands behind your head with your elbows pointing forwards. Slowly move your elbows back so they are pointing out to the sides, and then return to starting position.

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



## Stage 2 exercises

Start these exercises in the second 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 7 – 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.

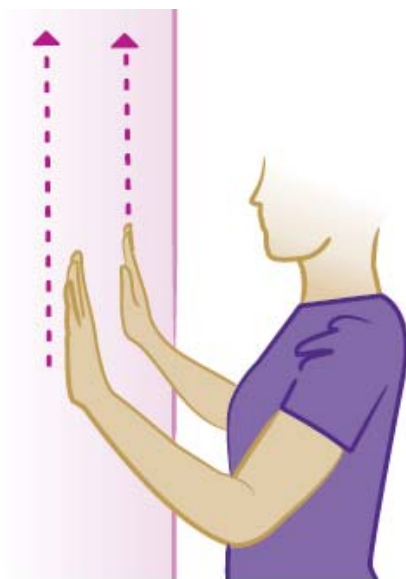
**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



### **Exercise 8 – 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.

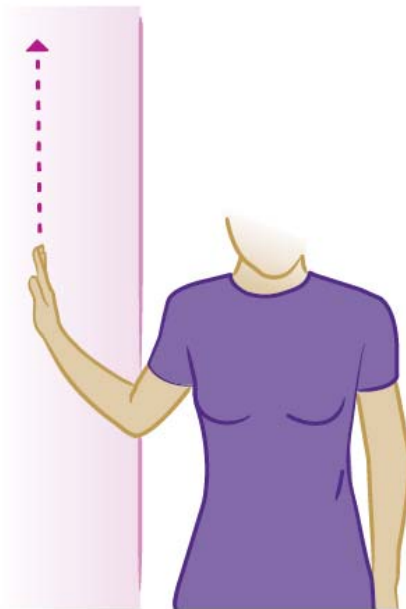
**Repeat four times a day, five repetitions each.**



### **Exercise 9 – 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 10 – 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.**



## 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 clinical nurse specialist 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.

### **Four to six weeks after surgery**

Four to six 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 six 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.

## **Eight weeks after surgery**

Eight 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.

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## This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

## 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, stacked vertically.

**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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