

Caring for my arm

Contents

This booklet is for people who have a neurological disability and their carers. It is aimed at people who cannot use their hand or arm at all.

The information in this booklet explains how to manage common problems which may arise when the arm is immobile (unable to move).

Your therapist will go through the exercises that are suitable for you, to make sure that you have the correct technique. They may also give you additional advice to manage your individual problems.

Common ways to care for the arm:

- 1 Exercises and positioning (page 3-8)
- 2 Handling the arm to prevent injury (page 9)
- 3 Dealing with hand swelling (page 10)
- 4 Cleaning inside a contracted hand (page 11)

Exercises and positioning

It is difficult to move the arm when muscles are not working properly. The arm will often rest in a position held close to the body.

Muscles become tight if they are not stretched regularly. This can lead to problems when putting on clothes, cleaning the skin and sometimes pain.

- **It is important to stretch several times a day.** See page 4, 6 and 7 for example exercises.
- **It is important to rest the arm in out-stretched positions for most of the day.** See page 5 and 8 for examples positions.

If your muscles have become tight and you cannot stretch your hand or elbow properly, you might need a splint. The GP can refer you to our splinting clinic if needed.

Exercises for a tight ELBOW



Straighten the elbow. Gently push the lower arm down with your unaffected hand or ask a carer to help.

Move slowly and gently until you feel resistance. Hold the stretch for up to 30 seconds. Repeat several times.

Resting positions for a tight ELBOW



Lying in bed



Sat in a chair

Exercises for a tight WRIST



Use your unaffected hand to gently push your wrist backwards.

Move slowly and gently until you feel resistance. Hold the stretch for up to 30 seconds. Repeat several times.

Exercises for tight FINGERS



With the wrist in a straight or bent position, use your unaffected hand to straighten the fingers.

Move slowly and gently until you feel resistance. Hold the stretch for up to 30 seconds.

Resting position for a tight WRIST and HAND



Handling the arm to prevent injury

The shoulder and hand are vulnerable to damage when muscles are not working properly. This can be painful leading to other issues including lack of sleep and further immobility.

To protect the arm:

- Always be careful when handling the arm.
- When sitting in a chair, rest the arm on a pillow or your lap.

For carers:

- Never pull on the arm when helping someone to move.
- Never lift under the person's shoulder.

Dealing with hand swelling (oedema)

Swelling is a collection of fluid in the body tissues. Swelling in the hand and arm can happen to the affected side with a neurological condition.

To reduce swelling:

- **Positioning:** The hand and arm should be raised using pillows when lying or sitting to encourage redistribution of fluid.
- **Massage:** Start at the tips of the fingers and use firm strokes up the fingers, hand and wrist towards the forearm. Massage both the palm and back of the hand.

Cleaning inside a contracted hand

A hand can become smelly or infected if it rests in a fist position. The closed hand is a perfect place for germs to grow - especially if the skin becomes damaged.

Skin damage can be prevented by keeping the hand clean and dry and trimming the nails.

To clean inside a contracted hand:

- Use a gentle soap with water and cotton wool if needed.
- Gently open the hand and fingers and wash inside the palm and between the fingers.
- Wash inside the hand daily
- If you notice skin damage, contact your GP as soon as possible.

Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns about your arm, please contact us on **020 7188 5088** (Monday–Friday, 8.30am –4.45pm). Please leave an answer phone message out of hours.

If you have any serious concerns about your arm, contact your GP.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

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

Leaflet number: 4342/VER1

Date published: January 2017

Review date: January 2020

© 2017 Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust