

Physiotherapist

416-323-6400 ext. 4414

Occupational Therapist

416-323-6400 ext. 4430

Followup appointment reminder

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

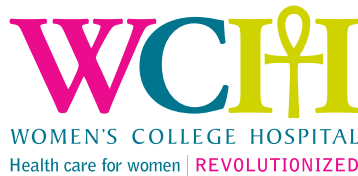
Please bring: booklet and any questions you may have.

Wear comfortable clothing. Please call if you must cancel

We would like to thank Ivan Ferris for generously donating his time in creating the pictures for our booklet.

“Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can.” — John Wooden

Form No. F-2134 (4-2013)



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womenshealthmatters.ca
womensresearch.ca
womenscollegehospitalfoundation.ca

Rehabilitation Following Breast Surgery



This booklet will help guide you in regaining your independence and getting back to your pre-surgery routine. After surgery, you may experience pain in your upper body. Rehabilitation can help restore full movement of your shoulder and minimize the pain and stiffness that can follow surgery. Remember, most people recover well after surgery.

General guidelines:

- After surgery it is important to continue to use your arm for everyday activities.
- Cradling your arm against your body may cause neck and shoulder stiffness.
- After surgery it will take about 2–3 months to recover full motion and strength of your arm.
- After surgery and radiation you will feel tightness. Continue with the exercises until the tightness is gone.
- Remember: for 6 weeks after surgery, do not lift more than:
 - 10 pounds with the affected arm(s) after mastectomy, lumpectomy, axillary node dissection and sentinel node biopsy surgeries.
 - 5 pounds with the affected arm(s) after a reconstruction surgery (TRAM flap, latissimus dorsi flap or tissue expanders)
- Remember the weight lifting restrictions when attempting to lift heavy grocery bags, small children, heavy laundry baskets or pets and during gym workouts.
- Also avoid strenuous, repetitive movements (e.g. vacuuming).

Books and videos

- [The Intelligent Patient Guide to Breast Cancer, 4th ed.](#), by Drs. Ivo, Olivotto, Karen Gelman, David McCready, Kathleen Pritchard, Urve Juusk (Intelligent Patient Guide, 2006)
- [Recovering from Breast Surgery](#) by Diana Strumm
- [Lymphedema: A Breast Cancer Patient's Guide to Prevention and Healing](#) by Jeannie Burt and Gwen White (Hunter House Publishers, 2005)
- [The Breast Cancer Survivor's Fitness Plan: Reclaim Health, Regain Strength, Live Longer](#) by Carolyn M. Kaelin, Francesca Coltreta, Josie Gardiner and Joy Prouty (McGraw-Hill, 2009)
- [Getting Back on Track: Life after Breast Cancer Treatment](#) by Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation, 2010
- [Exercises after Breast Surgery](#) by Canadian Cancer Society

Grocery delivery

- [Grocery Gateway](#) (grocery delivery service)
905-564-8778 (local) or 1-877-447-8778 (toll free)
www.grocerygateway.com
- Some local grocery stores also deliver groceries

Lymphedema information

- [National Lymphedema Network](#) www.lymphnet.org
- [Lymphovenous Association of Ontario](#) www.lymphontario.ca

Breast Reconstruction

- www.bra-day.com
- [Canadian Collaboration on Breast Reconstruction](#)
www.breastreconstructioncanada.ca/index.php

Nutrition information resources

- [American Cancer Society](#) www.cancer.org

Resources

General resources and groups

- [Canadian Cancer Society](http://www.cancer.ca) 1-888-939-3333 www.cancer.ca
- [Willow](http://www.willow.org) (telephone support) 1-888-778-3100 www.willow.org
- [Wellspring](http://www.wellsping.ca) 1-877-499-9904 www.wellsping.ca
- [Healing Journey Program](#)

(Coping with Cancer Stress Educational Program)

416-946-2062 www.healingjourney.ca

- [Gilda's Club](#) (support group and other services offered)

416-214-9898 www.gildasclubtoronto.org

Young Women Program

- [Nanny Angel Network](#) (trained volunteer professionals who donate their time to assist caring for children up to age 12)

1-877-731-8866 www.angelnetwork.com

- [Rethink Breast Cancer](http://www.rethinkbreastcancer.ca) www.rethinkbreastcancer.ca

Financial support

- [Kelly Shires Foundation](#) (offer some financial support for unforeseen expenses related to cancer)

1-877-436-6467 www.kellyshiresfoundation.org

- [Ontario Works](#) (offer some financial support for individuals who are in financial need)

416-392-8623 www.mcass.gov.on.ca

- [Ontario Disability Support Program](#)

(offer some financial support for individuals in financial need who cannot work due to illness) 1-888-789-4199

www.mcass.gov.on.ca

- [Trillium Drug Program](#) (offer some financial subsidies for prescription medication) 1-800-575-5386

www.health.gov.on.ca

Staying mobile post-surgery

It is important after your surgery to get out of bed, sit in a chair and walk in your home, with supervision if needed.

When you are in bed, move your ankles up, down and in circles.

Benefits of staying mobile include:

- keeping your lungs clear
- maintaining your strength
- preventing post-operative complications (blood clots in your legs)

Post-surgical swelling control

- You may notice swelling right after surgery. This is normal and should resolve.
- For a few days after surgery it is helpful to comfortably elevate your arm by using 2-3 pillows for support to minimize post-op swelling.
- If the swelling persists or returns at a later date, consult your doctor or therapist. **Do not ignore.**

Lying on your back:

place a pillow under the full length of your affected arm(s)



Lying on your side:

place a pillow under your affected arm and between knees



Sitting:

place pillows or cushions under your arm at the level of your heart



Pain

- Pain can be frightening and debilitating after surgery. Pain can make the muscles tighten and make it difficult to move your arm.
- You may notice burning and tingling in the chest area and under the arm. This is normal. This is caused by the irritated nerves after surgery. These sensations may get better. If they persist, contact your surgeon.

- It may be easier for you to complete your exercises if you do them about 20–30 minutes after taking your pain medication or after a warm shower.
- Relaxation, deep breathing exercises, learning to change the way you think about pain, prescribed pain medication, and using the arm in your everyday activities may also help improve your pain.
- One of the most important things you can do to relieve your pain is to consult your treatment providers about your pain experience.

Resuming daily activities after surgery

Resume normal activities as your strength allows, using both arms.

Benefits of being active and using your affected arm in activities:

- Increases your ability to perform activities of daily living
- Maintains muscle strength
- Increases arm movement
- Engaging in meaningful activities contributes to psychological well-being
- Don't try to do it all alone. Use help if you need it. Expect to be tired when you are healing and try to accept help when offered.

Remember to use both hands as you did before your surgery.

It may be tempting for you to protect and avoid using your affected arm, but it is important to involve the affected side in day-to-day activity within a comfortable range.

Examples include:

- after bathing, towel dry with both hands
- use your affected arm(s) when reaching into cupboards
- when cooking, do the stirring with the affected arm(s)

Helpful hints to make tasks easier:

- When blow-drying and styling your hair, it may be more comfortable initially to support the affected arm (on a telephone book for example).
- To fasten a bra that clasps at the back, begin by fastening the bra in front of you, and then turn it around. Progress to reaching behind your back to fasten it.
- Loose-fitting tops with front-closing zippers, ties or buttons are the easiest. When putting on a shirt, put the affected arm into the sleeve first. When taking off a shirt, take the affected arm out of the sleeve last.

develop a grocery list in case you have side-effects such as constipation or nausea.

Include nutritious snacks

During cancer treatment your body often needs extra calories and protein to help you maintain your weight and recover and heal as quickly as possible. Nutritious snacks can help you meet those needs, keep up your strength and energy level, and enhance your feeling of well-being.

To make it easier to add snacks to your daily routine, try the following:

- Eat small, nutritious snacks throughout the day.
- Keep a variety of protein-rich snacks on hand that are easy to prepare and eat. These include yogurt, cereal and milk, half a sandwich, a bowl of hearty soup, or cheese and crackers.
- Avoid snacks that may make any treatment-related side-effects worse. If you suffer from diarrhea, for example, avoid raw fruits, vegetables and dairy products.
- If you are able to eat normally and maintain your weight without snacks, then do not include them.

Breast Reconstruction

TRAM (Transverse rectus abdominis myocutaneous)

- It is normal to feel like you are bent over at the waist while you are standing or walking. Over the first week after the surgery gradually try to straighten yourself into upright position.

Tip: How to get in and out of bed following TRAM surgery

- Immediately after the TRAM, you want to minimize how much you use your stomach muscles when you are moving in and out of bed. This log rolling technique will minimize your pain.
- When lying on your back, first bend your knees up so that your feet are flat on the bed.

Tissue Expander Insertion

- After each expansion, use arm(s) only for light daily activities for the first 24 hours. Return to regular activities after 24 hours.
- Pressure over the chest is normal. It is important to continue using your arm.

Special exercises after reconstruction at one week

- Lie flat on your back and keep your legs straight, using pillows under your head and knees.
- Remove pillows as tolerated and hold for five minutes.

- Carry a travel size First Aid Lymphedema Kit that includes: alcohol wipes, Polysporin, bandaids, sunscreen and insect repellent.
- Contact your doctor if you notice any swelling, redness or warmth.

Do not ignore it!

Nutrition and breast surgery

When you are healthy, eating enough food to get the nutrients you need is usually not a problem. In fact, most nutrition guidelines stress eating lots of vegetables, fruits and whole grain products such as whole wheat breads or pasta; limiting the amount of red meat that you eat, especially those that are processed or high in fat; cutting back on fat, sugar, alcohol and salt; and staying at a healthy weight.

Eating well

When you have been treated for cancer, this may be hard to do, especially if you don't feel well. As a result you may need to change your diet to help build up strength and encourage faster healing.

- Don't be afraid to try new foods. Some things you may never have liked before may taste good to you during treatment.
- Choose a diet with many types of plant-based food. Try substituting dried beans and peas for meat at a few meals each week.
- Try to eat at least five colourful servings a day of fruits and vegetables, including citrus fruits and dark green and deep yellow vegetables. Colourful vegetables and fruits and plant-based foods contain natural health-promoting substances called phytochemicals.
- Limit high-fat foods, especially those from animal sources. Choose lower-fat milk and dairy products. Reduce the amount of fat in your meals by choosing lower-fat cooking methods such as baking or broiling.
- Limit the amount of cured, smoked and pickled foods that you eat.
- Try to maintain a healthy weight and be physically active.

Plan ahead

- Stock your pantry and freezer with your favourite foods so you won't need to shop as often. Include foods you know you can eat even when you are sick.
- Cook in advance and freeze foods in meal-sized portions.
- Talk to your friends or family members about ways they can help with shopping and cooking.
- You can also talk to your registered dietitian about any concerns you have about eating well. She or he can help you plan meals and

- Sitting down to complete tasks conserves more of your energy (up to 25 per cent).
- You should alternate periods of activity with periods of rest.
- You should build up your usual social activities gradually.

Tips to facilitate a successful return to work

- Depending on the type of activities you perform, it may be 6 to 8 weeks before you return to work.
- You may feel fatigued initially on your return to work.
- Educate your employer about your limitations, i.e. fatigue, lifting restrictions, etc.
- Get help or support from others to communicate with your employer if needed. Enlist your doctor or nurse.
- Recommend a GRADUAL return to work and/or work simplification program:
 - flex-time options
 - job-sharing or part-time options
 - opportunities for rest breaks and a quiet place to rest
 - modifying job duties
 - attending community return to work programs

Relaxation and stress management

Relaxation can help to restore energy lost due to tension and discomfort. Learning to relax is an effective way to regain a sense of control in your life, and is important in effectively managing stress and anxiety, and can increase energy levels.

There are many different ways to relax and manage stress in our lives:

- deep relaxed breathing exercises
- progressive muscle relaxation
- mental/guided imagery techniques
- prayer/meditation
- listening to music
- journal writing
- community relaxation groups (e.g. Wellspring, Gilda's Club)

Fatigue management

In getting back to your daily routine, it is normal to feel tired after surgery. Fatigue associated with cancer treatments can be quite different from normal feelings of being tired. At times it may feel as if some of the everyday tasks are more difficult to complete.

Guideline: Listen to your body. Conserving energy in small tasks will help build up enough energy to participate in activities which are meaningful to you. Do not wait until you are tired to stop and rest.

If you feel tired during activities, you may find the following fatigue management strategies helpful so that you are able to participate in the activities that are most important to you.

General tips to conserve your energy

Pace yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• break up the task into smaller manageable components• balance periods of activity with rest• take short breaks for a few minutes every 20–30 minutes while you are engaging in activities• spread heavy and light tasks out over the day, and week
Prioritize	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• decide which activities are of most value to you each day• make a “need” and “want” list in relation to tasks you must complete• complete the “need” to-do list and if there is energy left over, do the “want” to-do list• delegate tasks to family and friends
Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• consider which times of the day are best for you• gather all items required before you start a task• keep items within reach

The lymphatic system

The lymphatic system plays an important role in maintaining the fluid balance in your tissues. The blood vessels are responsible for filtering approximately 90 per cent of fluid in your body. The remaining 10 per cent of fluid consisting of larger proteins is filtered into the lymphatic system. When the lymphatic system is damaged, lymphedema may occur.

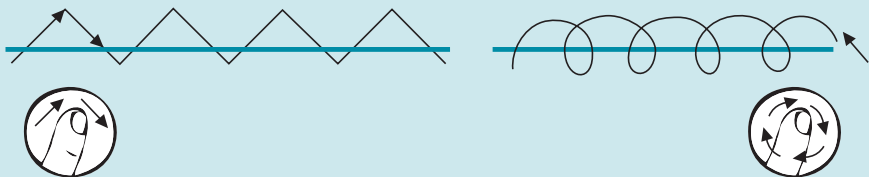
Lymphedema is an accumulation of protein-rich fluid that causes swelling in any part of the affected arm, hand, or sometimes the chest and back. Lymphedema can occur when the lymph system is interrupted due to surgery for the removal of lymph nodes, and/or from scarring of lymphatic vessels and nodes as a result of radiation treatment. Surgery and radiation may cause damage to the lymphatic system.

- Early signs of lymphedema may include:
 - your affected arm and/or breast feels heavy or full
 - your arm may tire more easily
 - you may have more difficulty and less flexibility moving your arm or hand
 - difficulty fitting sleeves, clothes, rings and watches
- lymphedema may develop shortly after treatments, or perhaps months or even years later
- remember that many people never develop lymphedema and each person has a unique situation

Suggestions to reduce your risk of developing lymphedema

- Look after your skin: avoid cuts, scratches, burns etc. to your hand(s) or arm(s). Reduce the risk of infection by wearing gloves for activities (e.g. gardening) and keeping skin clean, dry and well hydrated.
- Maintain a healthy body weight.
- Remind health-care professionals to draw blood, take blood pressure readings or insert IVs on the arm opposite that of your surgery, if possible.
- Be cautious when using saunas, hot tubs and steam baths.
- Gradually build up tolerance to activities and exercise (e.g. spring cleaning)
- Consider seeing a trained lymphedema therapist for manual lymphatic drainage massage and education (see resource section to find a therapist)

- Pay particular attention to any hardened or raised areas on your scar.
- Do the massage 2-3 times per day for 2-3 minutes, preferably before you do your exercises.
- Continue to do so for 2-3 weeks.



Once you are comfortable massaging with lotion, try the same pattern **without** lotion, moving the scar over the tissue surface below. The purpose of this is to ensure that the scar does not attach to the underlying tissue.

! Be careful of extreme temperatures such as hot/cold packs, hot water bottles etc. at your incision site due to the altered sensation and numbness.

! If your scar becomes extremely sore, blisters, re-opens, is hot, red, fever develops, or if the skin develops a rash, stop scar massage immediately and contact your doctor.

Look at your scar

Your body image, the way you think and feel about yourself, influences your self-worth and self-esteem. It is important to remember that the appearance of your scar will improve over time. Studies have been conducted stating women who look at their scars shortly after surgery appear to develop better coping strategies than those who delay in looking at their surgery scars.

Cording or Axillary Web Syndrome (AWS)

- a visible cordlike structure that looks and feels like violin strings under your skin that typically develops in your armpit but may extend down your arm
- AWS usually disappears over time with regular stretching and exercise

Patience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set realistic goals • do not worry if everything on your list is not completed • give yourself permission to feel fatigued and rest as needed • saving energy is smart, not lazy
Posture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • do frequent posture checks throughout the day, ask family members to assist • good posture is important to prevent tight muscles, pain, loss of strength and stress • practicing good posture habits prior to surgery will make it easier to continue after surgery • good posture will also maximize your breathing • see postural promotion exercises at the back of this booklet

Examples of energy conservation techniques:

- make large meals and freeze them for later use
- sit to prepare vegetables, mix ingredients and wash dishes
- soak dishes instead of scrubbing
- shop with someone who can assist with bags
- consider temporarily using a grocery delivery service for heavy items
- exercise is also another way to gain control over fatigue
- avoid doing so much in one day that you require a whole day to recuperate!

Driving

Before you resume driving it is important that you don't have pain that could affect your driving responses, especially in situations where you have to react very quickly! Remember that your reflexes may not be as sharp as they were before your surgery. You should be able to turn and move freely without any sharp pains or extreme discomfort upon doing so.

You must also be able to wear your seatbelt comfortably.

Do not drive if you are taking any heavy pain medications.

Perhaps take someone with you initially. A short drive in your driveway or empty parking lot is a useful first step.

Remember... if in doubt or uncomfortable, do not drive!

Psychosocial support

Emotional impact

As you adjust to your illness, there is going to be a spectrum of emotions that you may encounter, such as denial, anger, confusion, fear, loss and guilt. Everyone's journey is different; understand your symptoms and what will work for you. If you are having a difficult time adjusting, talk to your health-care provider about a referral to a trained professional such as a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker.

Seeking out support

This may be a time of high stress for you and your loved ones. Those that are close to you want to help. Take them up on these offers of support. Be specific with them about what your needs are. For example, if you are feeling fatigued and cannot do your grocery shopping, ask a family member or friend who has offered to support you to do this task for you. Your family and friends may genuinely want to help but may not know how. Be clear about what your needs are during this time. If you find that your support system is limited, speak to your health-care provider about supports in your community that may be able to assist you during this time.

Exercise

It is important after surgery to do exercises so that muscles and soft tissues that have been operated on do not get tight. It is normal to feel tightness, but you must continue the exercises until the tightness improves. The exercises should not increase your pain. In order to prevent or minimize this tightness, it is important to do your exercises regularly! Studies have shown that doing exercises prescribed by your health-care provider after surgery improves function and your quality of life, and reduces pain.

Guide to exercising

- Exercises may be done in front of the mirror to maintain good posture while doing the exercises.
- We expect that you may experience some discomfort while doing your stretches. If this discomfort is preventing you from completing your exercises, try doing the exercises approximately 20–30 minutes after taking your pain medication or after a warm shower.
- Breathe deeply as you do the exercises.

6 weeks and onward

It is now important to begin strengthening your upper body and core musculature. This will prevent future chronic shoulder and back pain.

You can now begin to re-introduce fitness into your life, including strengthening and endurance activities. There is a lot of research to show that it will help maintain your weight and decrease the side-effects of the cancer treatments.

Talk to your therapist or personal trainer for tips on exercising.

Scar management and sensation

Scar massage involves rubbing and moving the skin and underlying tissue in a firm but gentle manner at your incision site. Massage of the area is believed to eliminate tethering of scars and increase blood supply to the area.

The benefits of scar massage are that it can enable your scar to become flexible and soft which will have an additional benefit that you are able to regain movement in your shoulder area more comfortably.

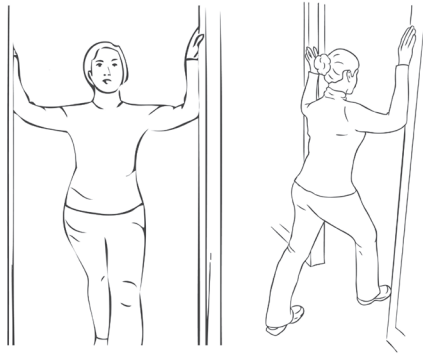
Your scar may feel sensitive, tight or itchy. Scar massage will help to decrease some of these sensations. Using non-perfumed, alcohol-free moisturizer when massaging can help keep your scar moisturized and prevent it from drying out, which can lead to the itching sensation.

Technique:

- You may begin to massage the scar approximately **3 weeks** after your surgery provided the incision is completely closed with no scabbing present.
- Apply a small amount of lotion (e.g. Vaseline petroleum jelly) to the pads of the index and middle finger.
- Apply firm but gentle pressure in a zig-zag pattern in one direction and a circular pattern in the other direction.
- Repeat the process across the entire scar.

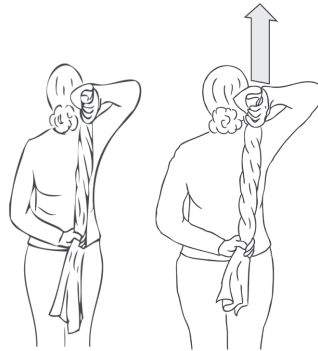
2. Doorway stretch

Stand in a doorway and place each hand on either side of the door frame. Slide your hands up to shoulder height. Lean forward until you feel a slight stretch across the chest.



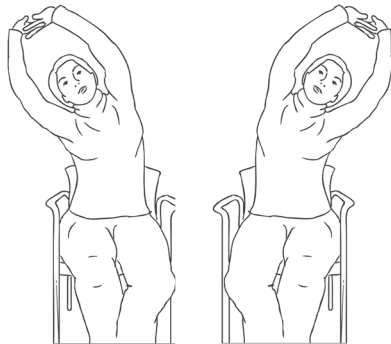
3. Towel pull

Hold a towel with both hands behind your back. Pull gently with your top hand toward your head. Reverse arms and repeat.



4. Snow angels or side bends

You can continue with the snow angels as in the level 1 exercises, but if you are finding those easy try this exercise. Clasp your hands together overhead. Bend at your waist and move your body to the right.



5. Shoulder retraction and depression

As previously described. Facing straight ahead, arms should be at your side with elbows bent. Squeeze your shoulder blades together and down, bringing your elbows behind you.

Deep breathing exercises

These exercises are very important to keep your lungs clear and fully expanded after surgery. Breathing awareness and good breathing habits will also enhance your psychological and physical well-being as well as help control your pain. You are encouraged to continue deep breathing exercises throughout your treatment, alone or in combination with other relaxation techniques. Deep breathing is also important during your recovery. It helps with relaxation and swelling reduction.

Try the deep breathing technique 10 times every hour that you are awake for approximately 2 days after your surgery.

Deep breathing technique:

- Inhale through your nose deeply all the way to the bottom of the spine, filling your lungs bottom, middle and top.
- You should feel your abdomen, rib cage and back all expand.
- Hold your breath for a slow count of 2.
- Breathe out through your mouth like you are blowing out candles (you should feel your tummy fall “inwards”).
- Every time you take a breath in and out, let your mind and body relax.

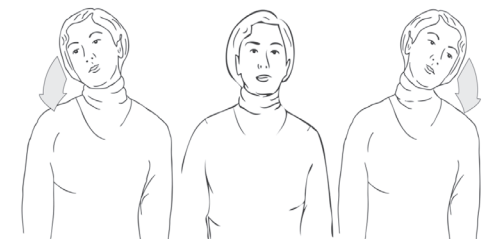
Right after surgery

- ☐ Day 0 – Week 1: Participate in all self-care activities as able (i.e. dressing, brushing teeth etc.)
- ☐ Week 1: Begin the exercises as outlined once the drain is removed.

These exercises can be done after the first week of surgery. Be gentle with the exercises. They should be done in a pain-free range of motion.

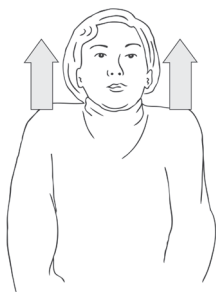
Do all exercises 3 times a day, 5 repetitions each.

1. Neck stretches (if you have any neck problems, do not do this exercise) Bend your head to the side as if your ear is trying to touch the shoulder. Repeat on the other side.



2. Shoulder (shrugs) circles

Try to bring your shoulders up towards your ears. Hold for 3 seconds and then relax.



3. Hands behind back

With your affected arm, reach behind your back. Try to slowly bring the hand up the back as if trying to reach the opposite shoulder. Return the arm to your side. Now try to touch the back of your neck and slowly reach the hand down the back (as if you are brushing long hair). Return the arm to the side.



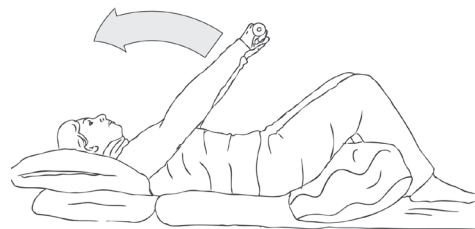
4. Pendulum swing

Stand or sit leaning forward. Support your upper body with your unaffected arm and relax your shoulder muscles. Allow your affected arm to dangle freely side to side, front to back, clockwise and counterclockwise.



5. Arm forward-assisted lift

Hold a cane or stick with your hands at shoulder width apart. Gently lift the stick up in front of you as high as you can, using your unaffected arm to assist the affected one, and reach behind your head.



6. Snow angels

Pretend that you are making snow angels. Both your arms should be at the side of your body and your thumbs pointing outward. Move your arm upward and away from the body, leading with your thumb. **Do not hike your shoulders, and try to stay in contact with the bed or floor.**



7. Shoulder retraction and depression

Facing straight ahead, arms should be at your side with elbows bent. Squeeze your shoulder blades together and down, bringing your elbows behind you. **Tip: Imagine that you are trying to hold a pencil between your shoulder blades.**



The next phase (3 weeks to 4 weeks after surgery)

You can now start working on getting back the full use of your shoulder. By six weeks you should have full movement in your arm and shoulder. It is normal to experience a “pulling” or “stretching” sensation in your chest and armpit area on the affected side. This should feel like a “good stretch” but should not be painful. Warming up before stretching can ease discomfort (e.g. do these exercises AFTER a warm shower, or after doing an activity with your arms for about 5 minutes).

Do all exercises 3 times a day, 5 repetitions each. Hold these exercises for 30 seconds or take 3-4 deep breaths.

1. Wall climb exercise

Stand facing a wall and ‘walk’ the affected hand up the wall. Lean into the wall while keeping the elbow straight, and try to touch the armpit to the wall. Alternatively, you can continue with using the cane while lying as with the first set of exercises, and bring the cane up over your head.

