



Canadian  
Cancer  
Society



# Exercises After Breast Surgery



1-888-939-3333 | [CANCER.CA](https://www.cancer.ca)

# Exercises After Breast Surgery

We provide a support system for people affected by cancer. Our services help answer your questions about cancer, manage life with cancer, find community and connection, and build wellness and resilience. Many of our programs are available in different languages.

From diagnosis to treatment to life after cancer, you can trust our publications for reliable information that's easy to understand.

We're here to support you.

*The Canadian Cancer Society acknowledges the input and guidance of the Oncology Division of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association.*



Canadian  
Physiotherapy  
Association

Association  
canadienne de  
physiothérapie



We have short, easy-to-understand videos on common cancer topics. Visit [cancer.ca/cancerbasics](https://cancer.ca/cancerbasics).

Photographs: © Getty Images

Licensed material is for illustrative purposes only; persons depicted are models.

## Table of contents

2	•	<b>About this booklet</b>
4	•	<b>Before starting the exercises</b>
4	•	Try to be active most days
5	•	Aim for slow, steady progress
6	•	<b>Right after surgery</b> The first 1 to 7 days
7	•	Deep breathing
8	•	Pump it up
9	•	Shoulder blade squeeze
10	•	Shoulder shrugs and circles
11	•	Arm lifts
12	•	<b>First stage of healing</b> The first 6 weeks after surgery
14	•	Arm reach
15	•	Wand exercise
16	•	Winging it
17	•	Snow angels
18	•	Wall climbing
20	•	Side bends
21	•	<b>Second stage of healing</b> From about 6 weeks after surgery
21	•	General conditioning
22	•	Strengthening
24	•	<b>Axillary web syndrome (cording)</b>
25	•	<b>Lymphedema</b>
26	•	Ways to reduce your risk of lymphedema
27	•	Ways to manage lymphedema

# About this booklet

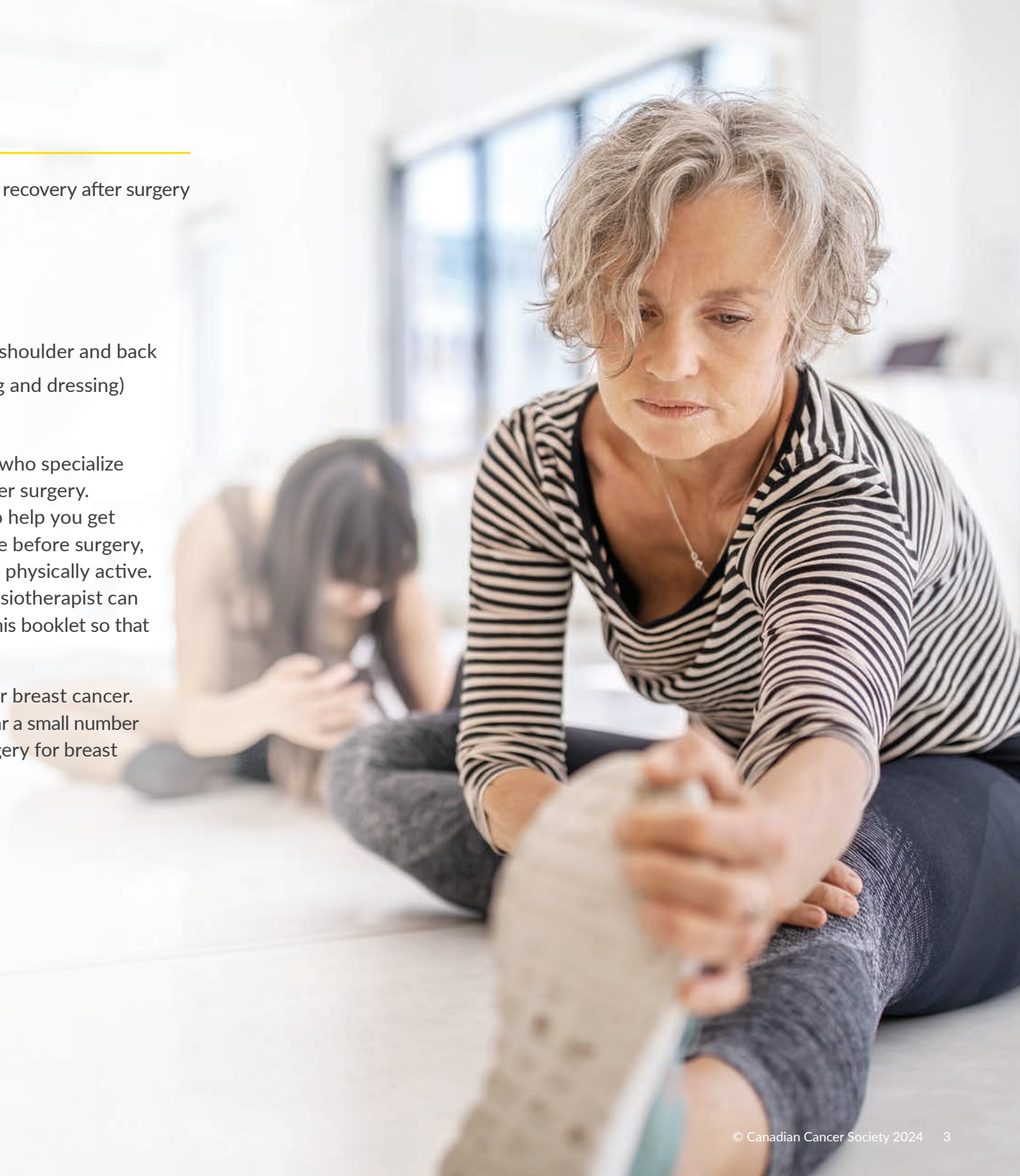
---

Exercise is an important part of your treatment and recovery after surgery for breast cancer. Exercise can help you:

- get movement back in your arms and shoulders
- improve muscle strength
- reduce fatigue
- reduce pain and muscle tightness in your neck, shoulder and back
- begin your daily activities again (such as bathing and dressing)
- improve your overall well-being

We developed this booklet with physiotherapists who specialize in working with people who have had breast cancer surgery. Physiotherapists are healthcare professionals who help you get back to how mobile and physically active you were before surgery, or maybe help you become even more mobile and physically active. They also help you prevent other problems. A physiotherapist can help you adapt the exercises and the timelines in this booklet so that they are safe and healthy for you.

This booklet is for anyone who has had surgery for breast cancer. Breast cancer occurs mainly in women, but each year a small number of men are also diagnosed. Men who have had surgery for breast cancer may also find this booklet helpful.



## Before starting the exercises

It's important to talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team before starting any exercises. Your doctor may suggest exercises or may suggest that you see a physiotherapist or occupational therapist who can help design an exercise plan for you and monitor your progress.

If you have had breast reconstruction, talk to your surgeon for more guidance.

### FINDING A PHYSIOTHERAPIST

To find a physiotherapist in your area who works with people who have had breast cancer surgery, visit the Oncology Division of the Canadian Physiotherapy Association at [oncologycpa.ca](http://oncologycpa.ca).

## Try to be active most days

You need to avoid vigorous exercises and sports in the early weeks after surgery, but you can stay active by taking some easy walks throughout the day. Over time, you will be able to walk farther and gradually add other activities. This will give you time to heal but still keep you active.

## Aim for slow, steady progress

Remember that everyone is different and heals at their own pace. The timelines in this booklet are only a guide. The timelines that are best for you depend on the surgery you have had. Some people may be able to work through the exercises quicker than others and with fewer limits.

These general guidelines can help you develop a successful exercise routine:

- Wear comfortable, loose clothing.
- Exercise after a warm shower when your muscles are relaxed and warm.
- Breathe deeply and often as you do each exercise.
- Do the exercises until you feel a gentle stretch, not pain.
- Do not bounce or make any quick, jerky moves while stretching.
- Do the lying-down exercises on the floor or a bed, whichever is best for you.

Aim for slow, steady progress that doesn't cause you pain. Trying to get through the exercises too fast might make it harder for you to get better. With some of the exercises, we suggest ways to make them easier at first.

If you have had surgery on both sides (bilateral surgery), you might need to make some changes to the exercises.



# Right after surgery

## The first 1 to 7 days

---

Many people can start these gentle exercises in the first week after surgery. Most people wait until their drain is removed. Talk to your doctor or physiotherapist about the best time for you to start.

You may feel your skin and tissue pull and stretch a bit with these exercises. Be careful not to make any sudden or vigorous movements until the surgical cut (incision) has healed.

Repeat these exercises 3 or 4 times a day.

### WHAT'S NORMAL AFTER SURGERY?

Some swelling is normal after surgery, and it's OK to start the exercises if you have some. You can help reduce swelling by propping your arm up on a pillow at the end of the day or during the day when you have some time.

If surgery has irritated some of your nerve endings, you may feel sore or numb or have tingling or burning feelings in the area of your breast surgery or down your arm, torso or ribs. These feelings may last for a few weeks after surgery.

Keep doing the exercises unless you notice that your swelling or tenderness gets a lot worse. If you have shoulder stiffness that does not go away, occasional or constant swelling or trouble getting back to your daily activities, talk to your doctor or physiotherapist.

## Deep breathing

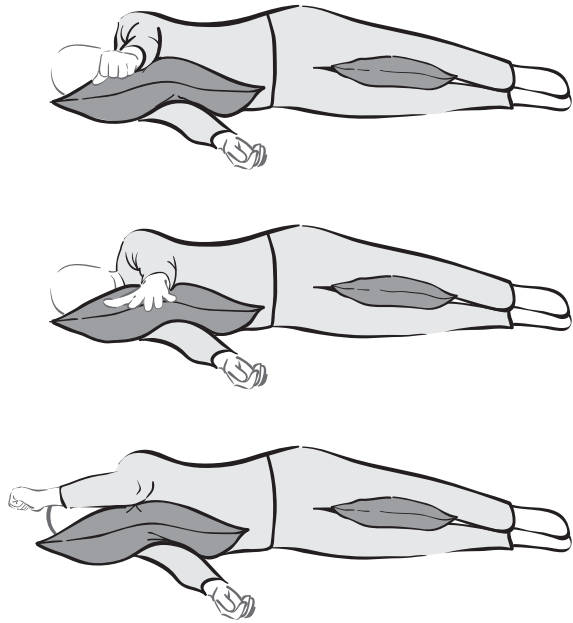
Deep breathing is an important part of your recovery. It helps expand your chest wall and improve the flow of lymph fluid around the area where you had surgery. It also helps you relax and can remind you to fill your lungs completely.

1. Lie on your back or sit in a chair and then take a slow, deep breath through your nose. Breathe in as much air as you can while trying to expand your chest and stomach like a balloon.
2. Keep your shoulders and neck relaxed.
3. Breathe out slowly and completely.
4. Repeat 4 or 5 times.

## Pump it up

This exercise helps reduce swelling after surgery by using your muscles as a pump to improve the circulation in your affected arm (on the same side as your surgery).

If you do not want to lie down for this exercise, sit in a chair that has good back support but no arm rests, and support your arms with pillows on your lap.

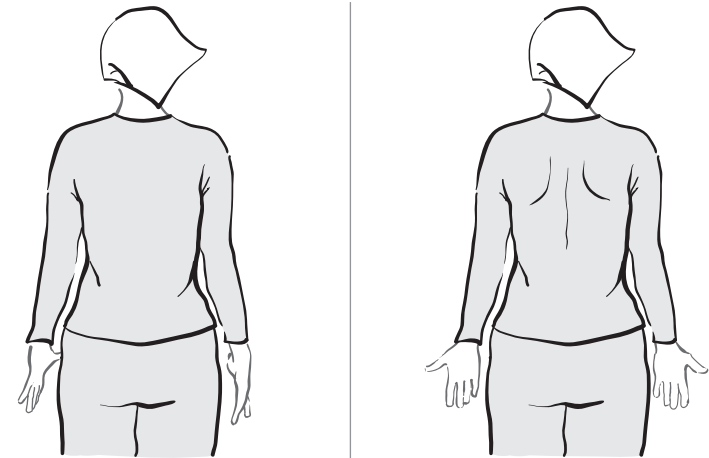


1. Lie on your unaffected side with your affected arm straight out, above the level of your heart. Use pillows if you need to.
2. Slowly open and close your hand. Repeat 15 to 25 times.
3. Then slowly bend and straighten your elbow. Repeat 15 to 25 times.

If you have had surgery on both sides, do the exercise while sitting in a chair that has good back support but no arm rests, and support your arms with pillows on your lap. Repeat the exercise with hands and arms on both sides.

## Shoulder blade squeeze

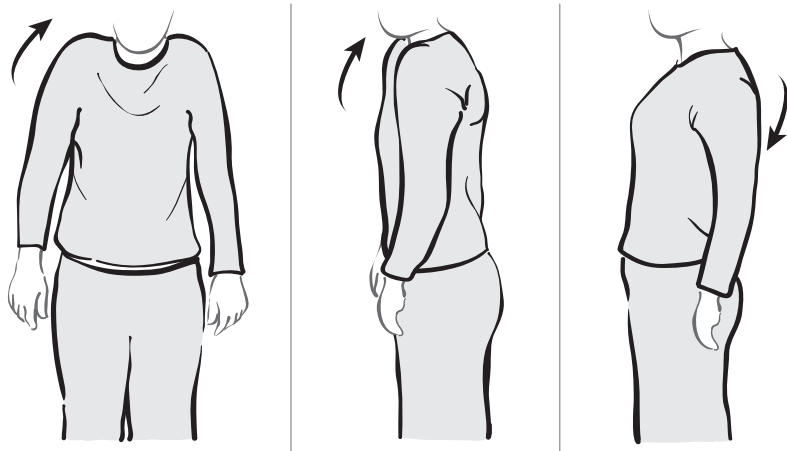
This exercise helps improve your posture and movement in your shoulder.



1. Sit in a chair facing straight ahead without resting your back on the chair, or stand up. Your arms should be at your sides with your elbows straight and your palms facing your sides.
2. Open your chest, gently squeeze your shoulder blades together and down and rotate your thumbs so your palms face forward.
3. Hold for 10 seconds and practise your deep breathing while holding this posture. Relax and return to the starting position.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

## Shoulder shrugs and circles

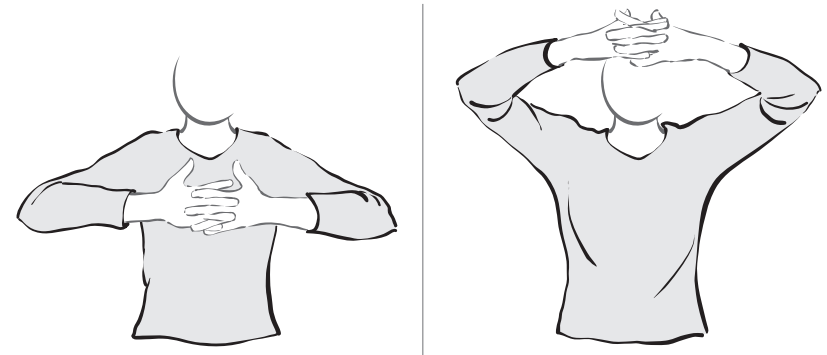
This exercise can be done sitting or standing. It's a good warm-up exercise and can help relieve tension in your shoulders.



1. Lift both shoulders up toward your ears. Keep your chin tucked in slightly. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds.
2. Rotate both shoulders back and down. As you finish making a circle, gently squeeze your shoulder blades together. Don't forget to keep your chin tucked in slightly.
3. Relax and then repeat 5 to 10 times.

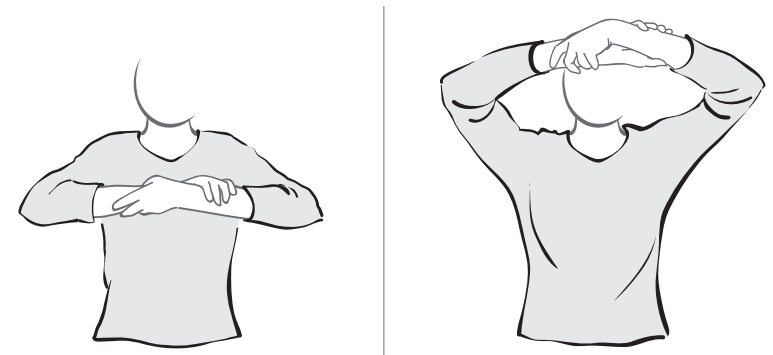
## Arm lifts

This exercise can be done sitting or standing. It helps improve movement in your shoulders.



1. Clasp your hands together in front of your chest. Point your elbows out.
2. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together.
3. Slowly lift your arms upward until you feel a gentle stretch.
4. Aim to hold for 5 to 10 seconds while you take a deep breath in and out. Then slowly return to the starting position.
5. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

If you need more support, grab your wrists with your hands instead of clasping your fingers.



# First stage of healing

## The first 6 weeks after surgery

Around the second week after surgery, many people can start doing the exercises in this section. Talk to your doctor or physiotherapist to make sure you are ready.

As you continue to heal, it's important to try to get back the full use of your shoulder. Keep doing the shoulder shrugs, arm lifts and shoulder blade squeeze exercises that you were doing right after surgery. Add the exercises in this section and do them 1 or 2 times a day.

You may wonder about your progress and whether you are pushing yourself too much or not enough. It's OK to feel a little discomfort while doing your exercises because you are trying to stretch out parts of your body that have tightened after your surgery. But listen to your body – you shouldn't feel worse after doing the exercises.

Talk to your doctor or physiotherapist if you have:

- sharp pain during an exercise
- pain that remains after exercise
- swelling in your shoulder, wrist or hand

During the first 6 weeks after surgery, it's safe to do light work around the house, like cooking, general tidying up, making beds or light weeding in the garden. Do this work for short periods at a time and rest in between. Wait until after 6 weeks to do heavier work, like changing bed linens, vacuuming, yardwork, gardening, washing floors or washing cars.

By the end of this first stage of healing, you should have full movement of your affected arm and shoulder.

### **AVOID HEAVY LIFTING**

For the first 6 weeks after surgery, don't pick up anything that weighs more than 5 kg (10 lb). Once you have healed more and safely built up your strength, you can get back to heavier lifting.





## Arm reach

This exercise helps improve the forward movement of your shoulder. It's OK to feel a gentle pull, but lower your arms and rest if you start to feel pain or pinching.

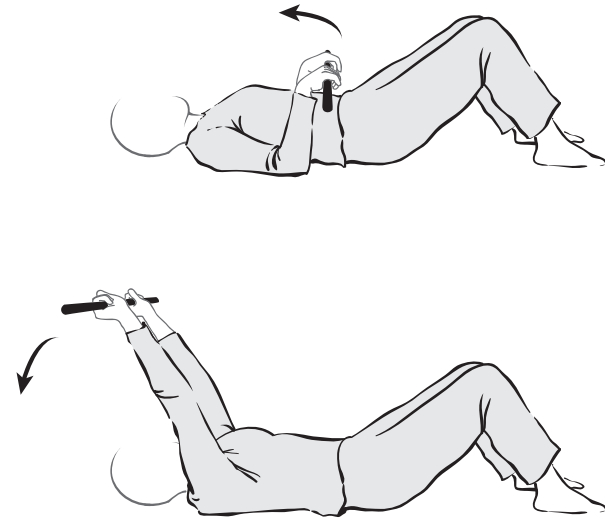


1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and both arms by your sides.
2. Use the hand on the unaffected side of your body (not the same side as your surgery) to grasp the wrist of your other arm.
3. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together.
4. Raise your arms up and back toward your head until you feel a gentle stretch in the chest and underarm.
5. Hold for 10 seconds. Lower your arms.
6. Repeat 5 times.

If you have had surgery on both sides, support your wrist from underneath rather than grasping it from the top. This will give more support as you progress to doing this exercise with both arms independently.

## Wand exercise

This exercise also helps improve the forward movement of your shoulder. You will need a “wand” to do this exercise – try a broom handle, stick or cane.

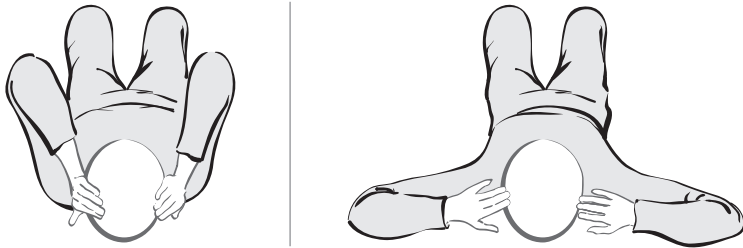


1. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Hold the wand with your hands spaced as wide as your shoulders.
2. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together.
3. Lift the wand over your head as far as you can until you feel a stretch, while keeping your arms straight. Your unaffected arm will help lift the wand.
4. Hold for 10 seconds, while you take 2 or 3 deep breaths. Slowly lower your arms back down.
5. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

## Winging it

This exercise helps improve movement in the front of your chest and shoulder. It may take several weeks of regular exercise before your elbows get close to the floor. You may have some discomfort with this exercise because you are trying to regain the end of your range of movement (being able to move your arm up, down, forward and backward).

If it's too hard to move your elbows down, place a pillow behind your head and shoulders. As you progress and the exercise gets easier, you can remove the pillow.

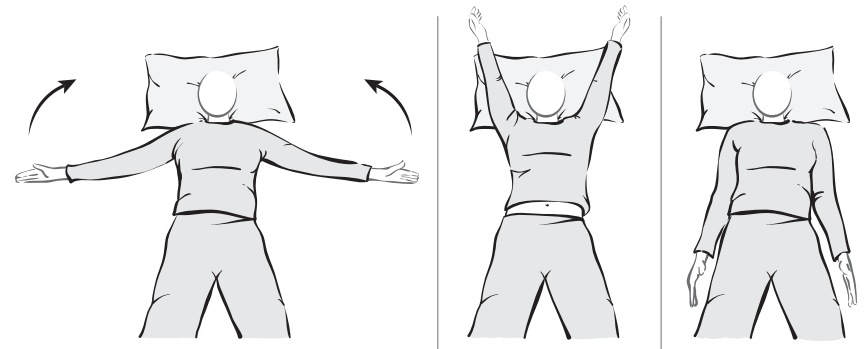


1. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Touch your fingertips to your ears with your elbows pointed to the ceiling. (If you can't comfortably put your hands at your ears, place your fingers on your forehead, palms facing each other.)
2. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together.
3. Move your elbows apart and down to the floor. Hold for 10 seconds.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

If you have had surgery on both sides and start to feel pain while doing this exercise, it may be too much for you at first. Try doing one arm at a time instead.

## Snow angels

This exercise helps to stretch the tight tissue in the armpit area and increases movement in your shoulders. It's OK to feel a gentle pull, but lower your arms and rest if you start to feel pain or pinching.



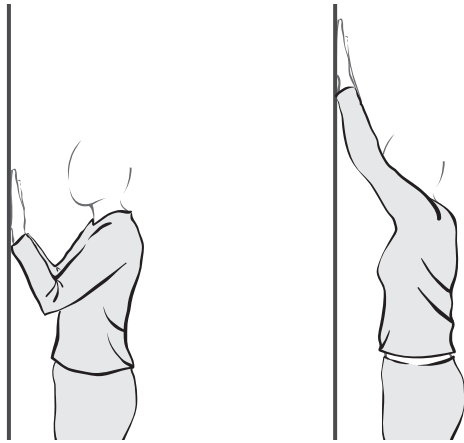
1. Lie on your back and extend your arms out at your sides, with your palms facing up.
2. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together.
3. Leading with your thumbs, move your hands up over your head, eventually touching your fingers at the top. Take 2 or 3 deep breaths before moving your arms back down to your sides (as if you're making an angel in the snow).
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

If you have had surgery on both sides and start to feel pain while doing this exercise, it may be too much for you at first. Try doing one arm at a time instead. Lift only as high as you feel comfortable, then slowly build up to the full position of lifting your arms over your head.

## Wall climbing

This exercise helps increase movement in your shoulder. Try to reach a little higher on the wall each day. This exercise can be done in 2 directions – facing the wall or with your affected side to the wall.

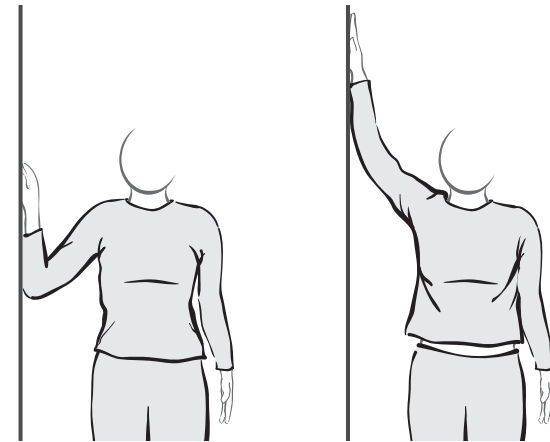
Avoid this exercise if you feel a pinch in the top of your shoulder when walking your fingers up the wall. You can try it again in a couple of days.



### Facing the wall

1. Place both your hands on the wall at shoulder level. As you do this exercise, make sure you stand tall, keep your tummy tucked in, gently squeeze your shoulder blades together and avoid arching your lower back.
2. Use the fingers of your affected arm to climb up or slide as high as you can go until you feel a stretch. Take a deep breath and hold for 10 seconds.
3. Return to the start position.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

If you have had surgery on both sides, do this exercise first with one arm. Then repeat with your other arm.



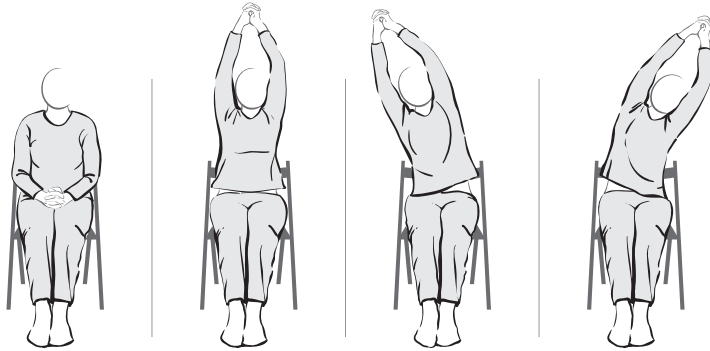
### Side wall stretch

1. Stand with your affected side about half a metre (2 feet) from the wall so you can touch it with your fingertips. Your arm should be just in front of your shoulder so you can see your hand on the wall in your side vision.
2. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together.
3. Walk your fingers up the wall or slide as high as you can go until you feel a stretch. Do not rotate your body toward the wall. Keep your torso facing forward even if it means you can't go up as high. Take a deep breath and hold for 10 seconds.
4. Return to the start position.
5. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

If you have had surgery on both sides, do this exercise first with one arm. Then turn around to face the other way and repeat with your other arm.

## Side bends

Once you're getting better movement in your shoulder, try this more advanced stretching exercise. It helps improve movement in your shoulder and chest wall on both sides of your body. You can do this exercise once a day.



1. Sit in a chair and clasp your hands together in your lap.
2. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together.
3. Slowly lift your arms over your head. Bend your elbows slightly.
4. When your arms are above your head, bend at your waist and move your body to the right. Hold for 10 seconds. Keep yourself firmly planted on the chair and use your right hand to gently pull your left arm a little farther to the right. Take a deep breath in and out.
5. Return to the centre and then bend to the left, using your left hand to pull your right arm farther.
6. Repeat 5 to 10 times on each side.

### ACHIEVING FULL MOVEMENT OF YOUR ARM

Continue to do side bends every day until both arms are equally strong and can move easily. This may take 2 to 3 months or a bit longer if you've had surgery on both sides. You should be able to reach across the top of your head and touch your opposite ear without feeling a stretch in your underarm.

## Second stage of healing

From about 6 weeks after surgery

Throughout the second stage of healing, keep building your strength. This could mean getting back to your old exercise routine, but you can also try out some new activities.

You can gradually start doing general conditioning and strengthening exercises when you feel stronger and your shoulder has a good range of movement. This means you can move your arm up, down, forward and backward.

### General conditioning

Regular aerobic exercise is any physical activity that gets your heart and lungs working harder and improves your general physical condition. It helps with your recovery and has many benefits. It can help you:

- improve your cardiovascular fitness (how well your heart, lungs and blood vessels bring oxygen to your muscles) so that you can do physical work for longer periods of time
- maintain a healthy body weight
- feel better, which may reduce stress and anxiety
- face the challenges of life after cancer

Brisk walking, swimming, running, cycling, hiking, dancing, climbing stairs and cross-country skiing are all examples of aerobic exercise. Using a stationary bike, treadmill, rowing machine or cross trainer can also improve your fitness. Taking yoga, tai chi or other exercise classes can help your overall ability to move and improve your energy levels.

Work toward being able to do 30 minutes of moderate activity most days of the week. Your physiotherapist can help you get there safely. But even if you can't do much at the beginning, a small amount of activity is better than none.

The “talk test” is a good way to see how hard you are exercising. If you are able to talk but not sing during the activity, it is moderate activity. If you are not able to say more than a few words at a time without pausing for a breath, it is vigorous activity.

## Strengthening

The muscles of the chest, shoulder, arm and hand need to be strong for you to be able to return to your full activities without hurting yourself.

Many people can start doing light strengthening exercises with elastic resistance bands or light weights of 500 g to 1 kg (1 to 2 lb) within 4 to 6 weeks after surgery. If you don't have light weights, you can use unopened soup cans or plastic bottles filled with water.

You can improve over time by increasing the number of times you do the exercises and gradually increasing the amount of weight that you are lifting. But it's important to make progress safely and build up slowly. If you don't exercise for several days, reduce the amount of weight slightly and build up again.

**Before starting:** Talk to your doctor or physiotherapist about starting a specific strengthening program and the exercises you can do.

**Once you've started:** Tell your doctor or physiotherapist if you have pain or more shoulder or muscle stiffness, your hand or arm begins to swell or your symptoms get worse.





## Axillary web syndrome (cording)

In the weeks soon after surgery, you may have pain that feels like a tight cord from your armpit down your arm or cords pulling from your chest or rib cage down toward your belly button. This is called axillary web syndrome (AWS), or cording. AWS appears as tender, cord-like structures below the skin in the chest, torso and armpit area and can be felt down into the arm. Sometimes they extend as far as the wrist. If you have cording, it might be hard to reach for objects overhead, lift your arm or straighten your elbow.

We don't know the exact cause of cording. The cords may be a lymphatic vessel or small vein that has been damaged during surgery.

If you get cording, keep doing your daily stretching to the point of feeling tension but not pain, and contact your physiotherapist. Cording goes away on its own most of the time, but your physiotherapist can help by giving you exercises to do.



## Lymphedema

Lymphedema is caused by a buildup of lymph fluid. It can happen soon after treatment, months later or even years later. It can be temporary, it can come and go or it can last a long time. The swelling happens because lymph nodes, which act as filters, have been removed by surgery or they've been damaged by radiation therapy or the cancer itself.

You have a lifelong risk of developing lymphedema.

As part of your ongoing recovery following surgery, it's important to be aware of the possibility of lymphedema and to act quickly if you notice any signs of swelling in your affected arm, hand or chest. Lymphedema is different from the temporary swelling in the breast, armpit and arm that can happen just after surgery.

### WATCHING FOR SIGNS OF LYMPHEDEMA

The start of lymphedema can be hard to notice, but it's very important to treat it quickly. Lymphedema is easier to manage if you get help for it early.

If you notice swelling, redness or increased warmth in your hand, arm or chest, tell your doctor right away – even if it has been years since you had treatment. Some other signs to watch for are:

- a feeling of fullness, puffiness or heaviness in your arm
- less flexibility in your hand, wrist or arm
- rings, watches or bracelets feeling tight even though your weight hasn't changed
- problems fitting your arm into your sleeves

## Ways to reduce your risk of lymphedema

One of the most important ways to reduce your risk of lymphedema is to get to and stay at a healthy body weight. If you do not have a healthy body weight, you are at a higher risk of getting lymphedema and it may be harder to control or treat it.

Here are some other ways to reduce your risk of lymphedema.



### Tips

- Take care of your skin and keep your arm moisturized. Breaks in the skin can sometimes lead to infection.
- Stay out of direct sunlight, and wear sunscreen to avoid sunburn, especially on your arm and chest.
- Wear insect repellent to avoid bug bites.
- Do not cut the cuticles back when you manicure your hands. Push them back.
- Be careful when shaving under your arm.
- Use the arm on your unaffected side to have blood samples or your blood pressure taken, or for injections, if possible.
- Wear work gloves when gardening or doing other outdoor chores.
- Wear loose-fitting gloves when working with household cleaning products or when your hands are in water for a long time.
- Use a thimble when sewing to protect your fingers from getting pricked by needles or pins.
- Treat infections in the arm on the same side as your surgery as soon as possible. Your doctor may suggest you keep antibiotics at home, just in case.
- Avoid using the arm on the same side as your surgery to lift or carry anything heavy, such as heavy groceries, unless you've built up your strength to do this.
- Avoid tight-fitting cuffs, watchbands, bracelets and rings, and tight or narrow bra straps.
- Exercise regularly, but don't overdo it in the early weeks after surgery. Moving your arm and contracting the muscles as you exercise helps move fluid through your arm. Talk to your physiotherapist about the right exercise for you. Increase your exercise gradually and watch how your body responds.

## Ways to manage lymphedema

One of the best ways to manage lymphedema is to wear a compression garment on your arm, hand or chest. A lymphedema therapist can tell you more about what type of compression is best for you and when to wear the garment. Here are other things to consider when you have lymphedema.



### Tips

- Be careful using saunas, steam baths and hot tubs or doing "hot" yoga. Some people find that heat can make lymphedema worse.
- Travel with care. For some people, their lymphedema is worse when they travel a long distance in an airplane (over 4 hours) or when arriving at a hot climate. If you have a compression garment, your healthcare team may suggest you wear it when flying or in hot climates.
- Keep your arm moisturized. This helps keep the skin supple and prevents it from becoming dry and cracked, especially in winter.
- If you get a cut or burn on your arm or hand, wash the area well with soap and water to avoid infections and keep it clean at all times while it heals. Your doctor or pharmacist may suggest an antibacterial cream or ointment.

# Notes

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## WE'RE HERE TO HELP



### Find information you can trust

Visit cancer.ca for information on more than 100 cancer types. You'll find topics ranging from diagnosis and treatment to managing side effects, living with cancer and reducing your risk. We also have publications, videos and webinars.

.....



### Get answers to your questions

When you have questions about diagnosis, treatment, prevention, emotional support and other services, our trained cancer information specialists can help you find answers. Call us at 1-888-939-3333. Our Cancer Information Helpline is available in English and French with an interpreter service for other languages.

.....



### Connect with someone who's been there

Visit CancerConnection.ca to join our moderated online community. You can join discussion groups, get support and help others at the same time. It's a safe place to connect, learn and share your experience with cancer.

.....



### Find services in your community

Our Community Services Locator (CSL) helps you find the cancer-related services you need. You can search over 4,500 listings across Canada for emotional support programs, home care, help getting to your cancer treatment, where to find a wig or prosthesis and much more. Start your search at cancer.ca/csl.

The Canadian Cancer Society works tirelessly to save and improve lives. We raise funds to fuel the brightest minds in cancer research. We provide a compassionate support system for all those affected by cancer, across Canada and for all types of cancer. Together with patients, supporters, donors and volunteers, we work to create a healthier future for everyone.

**Because to take on cancer, it takes all of us. It takes a society.**



Canadian  
Cancer  
Society

**IT TAKES A  
SOCIETY**

**1-888-939-3333  
CANCER.CA**

This is general information developed by the Canadian Cancer Society. It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified healthcare provider.

The material in this publication may be copied or reproduced without permission. However, the following citation must be used: *Exercises After Breast Surgery*. Canadian Cancer Society 2024.

© Canadian Cancer Society 2024 · 32437-1-NO