

Stretches and Exercises

After your mastectomy or axillary lymph node dissection

This handout explains the stretches and exercises to do after your mastectomy. These stretches and exercises help:

- *Bring your arm movement (range of motion) back to normal*
- *Improve your posture*
- *Loosen up tight areas across your chest and armpit*



Scan for a digital copy of this handout.

When to Start

Try to start the stretches and exercises a day or two after your surgery. Do them until you see a physical therapist/occupational therapist (PT/OT), or until your arm movement is back to normal. Your PT/OT will create an exercise plan based on how you are recovering.

Activity Restrictions

- Do **not** raise your arm above 90 degrees (the height of your shoulder) until your surgeon tells you it is safe. This is usually about 3-4 weeks after surgery.
- Read your CareMap or post-op instructions carefully for other activity guidelines.

The Weeks After Surgery

Continue following your surgeon's instructions for movement and lifting. During and after exercise, pay attention if your arm is:

- Swollen
- Feeling:
 - Full
 - Sore
 - Heavy
 - Firm

If you notice any of these symptoms, rest and elevate (raise) your arm. Go back to easier stretches and exercises the next day. Call your surgical team if your symptoms do not go away within 2 to 3 days.

Exercise Guidelines

- Do all exercises slowly and only as recommended by your care team.
- Take slow, deep breaths as you exercise.
- Your main goal after surgery is to heal. Allow yourself to feel a gentle stretch. **Stop and rest if you feel pain.** Take acetaminophen (Tylenol) and or ibuprofen (Advil) as prescribed if your pain continues.
- Your surgeon may recommend that you see a PT/OT starting about 4 weeks after surgery. The PT/OT will help you continue to increase your range of motion and build up your strength.

Exercises

Try to start these exercises 1-2 days after surgery. Do the exercises in the order they are listed in this handout. Pace yourself:

- On your first day, try doing the first 3 exercises. If you can tolerate those, add more exercises the next day.
- Continue adding exercises each day until you can do and tolerate all of them.
- Do the entire set of exercises until you meet with a PT/OT or until your arm movements are back to normal.

Walk

Walking can help your heart and lungs. It can also increase your energy and improve your mood.

- Walk at least 4 times per day.
- Start with walking about 10 to 15 minutes at a time.

Practice Good Posture

This activity helps improve breathing. It prevents tightness and strain in the muscles around your chest, neck, back and shoulders.

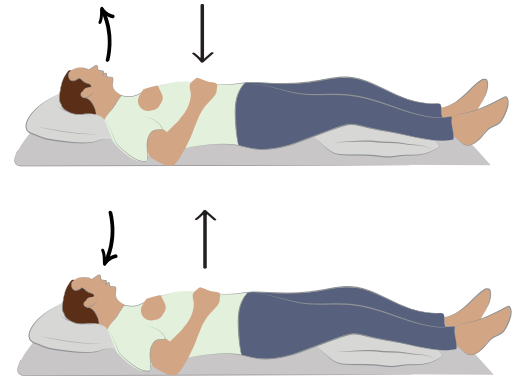
1. Let your arms relax and hang down the sides of your body.
2. Stand straight and tall with your shoulders down and relaxed.
3. Avoid slouching and shrugging your shoulders up towards your ears.
4. Do not push your head forward or backward. Keep your head straight (level with your earlobes) and in line with your shoulders.
5. Correct your posture often during the day.



Belly Breathing

This exercise helps you relax, reduces stress. It also improves the circulation of *lymphatic* fluid, which helps support your immune system.

1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and your head supported.
2. Put one hand on your upper chest and the other just below your ribcage.
3. Breathe in slowly through your nose so that your stomach moves out gently against your hand. The hand on your upper chest should remain still. Do not strain.
4. As you breathe out through your mouth, let your stomach relax and return to the resting position.
5. Repeat 5-10 times, 1-2 times per day.

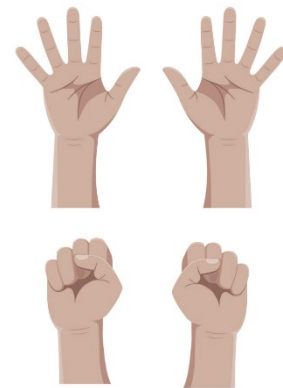


Belly Breathing

Hand Movement

This exercise helps with lymphatic circulation and hand stiffness.

1. Start with your fingers straight and spread apart.
2. Gently close your hand into a fist.
3. Open and spread your fingers.
4. Repeat 10 times, 1-2 times per day.

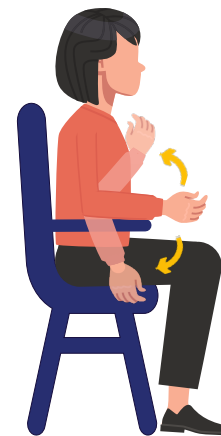


Hand Movement

Elbow Movement

This exercise helps with lymphatic circulation, elbow stiffness, and arm tension.

1. Sit or lie down with your arm supported.
2. Bend and straighten your elbow.
3. Repeat 10 times, 1-2 times per day.

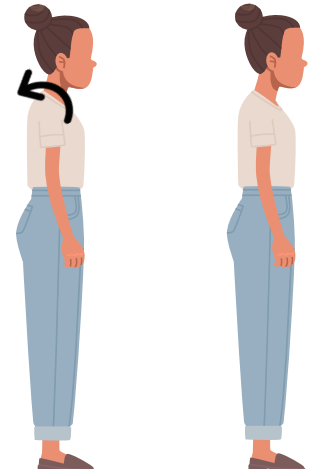


Elbow Movement

Shoulder Rolls

This exercise helps to improve your posture. It decreases tension and stress in your upper back.

1. Stand or sit with your arms relaxed at your sides.
2. Raise your shoulders up toward your ears and roll them backwards.
3. Bring your shoulders back to the start position.
4. Repeat 10 times, 1-2 times per day.



Shoulder Rolls

Shoulder Rotation

This exercise helps with shoulder stiffness and tightness.

1. Sit or stand in a comfortable position. Your arms should be supported on a table or counter.
2. Have your elbow at your side and bent at a 90-degree angle. See the picture on the right.
3. Rotate your arm out and back in while keeping your elbow at your side.
4. Repeat 10 times, 1-2 times per day.



Shoulder Rotation

After your drains are taken out

Do the exercises below after your drains are taken out. Continue to see a PT/OT. Your PT/OT will create an exercise plan for you based on how you are recovering.

Shoulder Blade Squeezes

This exercise helps strengthen muscles that support good posture and relax tight muscles in your chest.

1. Sit in a chair or stand. Relax your arms at your sides.
2. Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together, bringing your elbows slightly behind you. Avoid shrugging your shoulders up towards your ears.
3. Return to the starting position.
4. Repeat 10 times, 1-2 times per day.



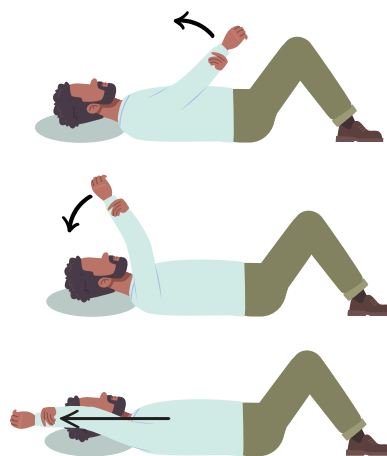
Should Blade Squeezes

Lying Down Shoulder Stretch

This exercise helps improve shoulder movement so you can raise your arm(s) over your head.

1. Lie down with your knees bent and feet flat. Put a pillow under your head or knees if it is more comfortable.
2. Hold onto your surgery-side wrist with your opposite hand to gently guide the movement.
3. Slowly raise your arm over your head leading with your thumbs. Keep your elbows as straight as you can.
4. Hold 5 seconds.
5. Return to the starting position.
6. Repeat 10 times, 1-2 times per day.

It may take a few days until you can raise your arms to shoulder height. Set movement goals with your surgeon or PT/OT.

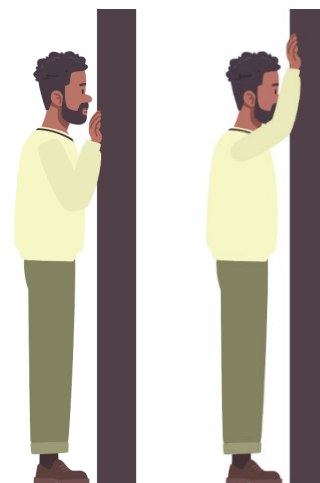


Lying Down Shoulder Stretch

Standing Shoulder Stretch

This exercise helps improve shoulder movement so you can raise your arm(s) over your head.

1. Stand facing a wall with your toes about 8-10 inches from the wall.
2. Place both of your hands on the wall.
3. Moving your hands at the same speed, “climb” your fingers up the wall reaching as high as you can. Stop when you feel a gentle stretch.
4. Avoid arching (bending) your back as you move your fingers up the wall.
5. Hold for 5 seconds.
6. Bring your arms back down to the starting position.
7. Repeat 10 times, 1-2 times per day.



Standing Shoulder Stretch

Questions?

Your questions are important. Contact your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

During Clinic Hours (Monday through Friday except holidays, 8:00 am to 4:00 pm): If you have any questions or concerns, we recommend messaging your surgeon through EPIC MyChart. Please include a photo if it would help explain your concern.

Or you may call the Breast Surgery Clinic at 206.668.6746.