



*Patient Rehabilitation Guide*  
**After Breast Surgery**



## Introduction

Therapists at Hartford HealthCare Rehabilitation Network (HHCRN) have designed this book for individuals who have undergone breast surgery. Our goal is to educate you about symptoms that are commonly experienced following breast surgery and to explain safe positions, activities and exercises to aid in the healing process. Several recent reports suggest that staying active following cancer can help reduce fatigue, pain, and anxiety, as well improve self-esteem and energy levels.

Physical rehabilitation can help you to regain arm and shoulder flexibility, to restore strength, to adjust to new physical limitations, and to find the safest ways to perform everyday activities. It is important to start an exercise program slowly (pace yourself) and increase activity over time, according to your physician's recommendations.



## Sensations after Breast Surgery

After breast surgery, you may feel various sensations in the arm, breast, or chest wall. Most women experience a variety of sensations. They usually diminish within a few months after surgery. However, some sensations can take a longer time to diminish; nerves take the longest time to heal. Some degree of numbness and change of sensation may be permanent.

Do not use a hot water bottle, heating pad, or hot compress on your surgery sites as they could result in bad burns. Itching is a sensation that often accompanies healing. It will decrease over time.

The sensations that you may experience in the area of your surgery include:

- **Incisional sensation** – this is a pulling at the site of the incision when you move, such as in exercise or just lifting the arm. If you feel pulling or discomfort limit your movement to that point. It generally takes approximately 10 to 14 days for your incision site to heal. Your doctor will tell you when you are healed and then you can move your arm freely through all motions
- **Referred sensations** – these sensations occur on the side of the surgery. They are feelings of heaviness, numbness, tingling, pins and needles, burning, or the feeling of water running down your arm or side. You may experience them in the front or back part of the arm, on the back of the shoulder, down your arm and/or in the rib cage on the side of surgery

During surgery, small sensory fibers were disrupted, and it can take up to a year to heal completely. As the healing continues, these sensations will begin to disappear. These are a normal part of the healing process and if you feel them, you should continue to do whatever activity you are doing

- **Phantom sensation** – is when you experience the presence of the breast or portion of the breast that the surgeon removed. This is normal and it may last for a while after surgery. Some people never experience phantom sensation. If you find it bothersome, take a soft pillow and apply some gentle pressure with your hands over the area and this may help decrease phantom sensation

## Swelling:

- After your surgery, you may have some swelling or puffiness in your hand or arm on the side of your surgery. This is normal and will usually resolve itself. If you notice swelling in your hand or arm, raise your arm above the level of your heart several times a day while you do hand pumps. Slowly open and close your fist 10 times
- If you are able to sleep on the opposite side of your surgery, you may place one or two pillows in front of you and rest your arm on those pillows. The elevation and pumping action of the muscles help gravity to drain the fluid out of the arm
- You may also find it helpful to elevate your arm a few times a day for about 20 minutes

## Arm Elevation Techniques:

- While sitting or while lying on your back rest your arm on a few pillows next to you
- Your arm should be raised above the level of your heart
- Avoid holding your arm up for an extended period of time to reduce arm muscle fatigue

## Lymphedema:

If you have had axillary lymph nodes removed, the way fluid circulates in your arm may have changed, and you are at risk for developing lymphedema. Lymphedema is an abnormal swelling in your hand or arm on the side of your surgery. It can also occur as swelling in the breast or chest wall. You may be referred to a Certified Lymphedema Therapist (CLT) to assess your swelling if it persists. This specialist will fit you with appropriate compression garments and provide Complete Decongestive Therapy to reduce the swelling. Early intervention is key.

Make sure to ask health care workers to insert IV's, take blood pressure and draw blood from the unaffected arm. If both sides had lymph nodes removed, talk with your doctor about which arm would be safest to use.





## Exaggerated Deep Breathing:

Deep breathing helps to relieve tension, relaxes the body, eases discomfort around your incision and stimulates your lymphatic system.

- Sit comfortably in a chair or lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor, hands resting on your belly
- Take a slow deep breath through your nose
- Let your chest and belly rise as you breathe in, then breathe out slowly through your mouth
- Repeat for 5-10 times at least 6 times a day

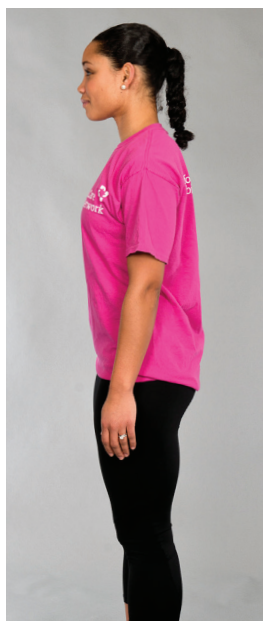


# Practicing Good Posture

Shoulders  
even

Hips  
even

Knees even  
and pointing  
down



Stand tall  
with spine  
in neutral  
position

Tuck chin in.  
Feel length  
in back of neck

Keep chest  
lifted

Shoulders  
back and down

Draw navel  
toward spine  
and hold

Proper posture is important to prevent tight muscles, pain, loss of strength and stress on your joints. Practicing good posture throughout your daily activities can protect your joints and muscles from too much strain. Good posture habits before surgery or radiation will make it easier following surgery or treatment. Cancer related fatigue from chemotherapy could also lead to a forward posturing.

If you have muscle pain or tightness after your surgery, you may develop a movement pattern that is known as “protective posturing.” Protective posturing may cause muscles to tighten and shorten which may overtime cause pain in the arm, chest, neck and back.

Changes can also occur after radiation therapy. Radiation therapy may stiffen or shorten the chest muscles, which can cause the tissue to become thick and scarred. These changes may not occur immediately, but may continue to happen months after radiation treatment.



## Posture Tips:

- Lift chest up, align shoulders over the hips, tuck chin in, shoulders back and down
- When you have pain, do a posture check, pain is often caused by bad posture
- Use a mirror to see how your posture looks and make adjustments for good posture
- Avoid staying in one position for long periods of time

## Exercise:

Regular exercise after your surgery is good for you and is important in your recovery. Exercises help to decrease side effects of your surgery and will help you return to your normal daily activities.

**However until your doctor says they are okay, do not do:**

- High-impact aerobics
- Jog
- Lift weights
- Swim

Ask your surgeon when you will be ready to progress with an exercise program and when you will be ready to be referred to physical rehabilitation. Your physical or occupational therapist will perform an evaluation and will develop a comprehensive individualized exercise program for you.

**This program will include:**

- Range of motion/Flexibility Exercises
- Postural Exercises
- Resistance Exercises/Weight Training
- Aerobic Exercise Guidelines

Your therapy will also include manual techniques as appropriate with the goals of increasing your shoulder range of motion, restoring your chest wall flexibility and to facilitate lymphatic flow as your body heals. Your therapist will provide instruction in proper posture, safe return to prior level of activity, self scar massage technique, diaphragmatic breathing, and lymphedema precautions.

## Immediate Post-Op Precautions

Please check with your physician for specific guidelines that may be different than below

- No ice or heat on the chest after a mastectomy, intermittent ice is OK after a lumpectomy
- No lifting more than 5lbs for 4-6 weeks, unless directed otherwise by your surgeon after the first post-op appointment
- Do not raise arms higher than shoulder height and do not raise arms above 90 degrees for 4-6 weeks as a general guideline, but speak to your surgeon for specific limitations

It is OK to raise your arms to brush your teeth, comb your hair, or perform basic face hygiene

- Avoid reaching and stretching above your head while the chest muscle and incisions are healing
- No pressure on the chest, do not sleep on stomach
- Patients should contact their nurses with any questions (Plastic/Breast surgeon's office nurse, the nurse navigator, or the homecare nurse if applicable)

## Early Exercises Following Breast Cancer Surgery

Ask your surgeon when you are ready to begin each exercise. All exercises should be done gently so you feel comfortable strain and not pain.





## Forward Wall Walking

1. Stand facing a wall with toes six inches from wall.
2. Place both hands on wall at a level that's comfortable.
3. Gently use fingers to climb wall reaching to a comfortable range no higher than shoulder height. Hold for 10 seconds and return to starting position.

Repeat 5 to 10 times in a comfortable range two times per day.



## Side Wall Crawl

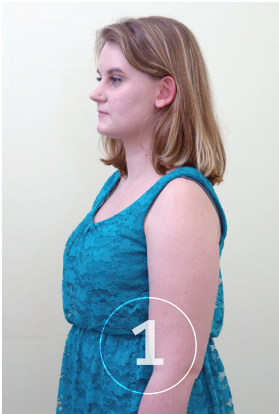
1. Stand with affected side one foot away from wall.
2. Place hand on wall and use fingers to climb wall to a comfortable range and no higher than shoulder height.
3. Hold for 10 seconds then return to starting position.

Repeat 5 to 10 times in a comfortable range two times per day.



## Shoulder Shrugs

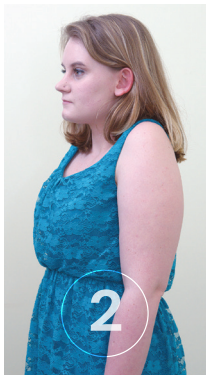
1. Stand or sit comfortably with arms relaxed at your sides.
2. Gently shrug shoulders up towards ears.
3. Gently shrug shoulders back down.



## Shoulder Rolls

1. Stand or sit comfortably with arms relaxed at your sides.
2. Raise shoulders up and gently squeeze backwards.
3. Lower shoulders back down.

Repeat 5 to 10 times in a comfortable range two times per day.



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