



Canadian
Cancer
Society



Exercises after Breast Surgery



This guide is for anyone who's had surgery for breast cancer. Breast cancer happens mainly in women, but each year a small number of men are also diagnosed. We sometimes refer to *women* in the text, but men who've had surgery for breast cancer may also find this booklet helpful.

The information in this booklet is general and shouldn't replace discussions with your healthcare team.

The Canadian Cancer Society acknowledges the input and guidance from the Canadian Physiotherapy Association.



Canadian
Physiotherapy
Association

Association
canadienne de
physiothérapie

Photographs: © Getty Images

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

Table of contents

2	Introduction
3	Before getting started
3	Try to be active
3	Finding a physiotherapist
4	Right after surgery – <i>The first 1 to 7 days</i>
4	Deep breathing
5	Pump it up
6	Shoulder shrugs and circles
7	Arm lifts
8	Shoulder blade squeeze
9	First stage of healing – <i>The first 6 weeks after surgery</i>
10	Arm reach
11	Wand exercise
12	Winging it
13	Snow angels
14	Wall climbing
16	Advanced exercises for the first stage of healing
16	Side bends
17	Other activities
18	Second stage of healing – <i>From about 6 weeks after surgery</i>
18	Strengthening
19	General conditioning
20	Axillary web syndrome (cording)
21	Lymphedema
22	Ways to reduce your risk of lymphedema
23	Ways to manage lymphedema
24	Resources
24	Canadian Cancer Society

Introduction

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

- begin your daily activities again (such as bathing and dressing)
- keep movement in your arms and shoulders
- improve muscle strength
- reduce stiffness in your joints
- reduce pain in your neck and back
- improve your overall well-being

Everyone is different and heals at their own pace. Talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team before starting the exercises in this booklet, and let them know about your progress.

The timelines suggested are only to guide you. Some exercises can be started right after surgery. More advanced exercises that involve the full range of motion of your shoulder and overhead movements can usually be started once you've had your drain removed.

Strengthening and general conditioning exercises can be added to your routine when you've healed more.

- ✔ If you've had surgery for breast cancer on both sides – for example, a double (bilateral) mastectomy – you can still do some of the exercises in this booklet. The other exercises have been adapted for you. Look for this icon ✔ for notes about how you can change these exercises. Check with your doctor or physiotherapist about what exercises are best for you.

Before getting started

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 measure your range of motion and help design an exercise plan for you.

Remember that everyone recovers at their own pace. Some people may be able to work through the exercises in this booklet 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.
- Contact your doctor if you have any unusual swelling or pain.

Try to be active

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

Finding a physiotherapist

To find a physiotherapist in your area who works with women who've had breast cancer surgery, visit the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's website at physiotherapy.ca. You can also ask your doctor for a referral or talk to other women who've had breast cancer.

Right after surgery

The first 1 to 7 days

These gentle exercises should be done the first week after surgery, or if you have a drain, while the drain is still in place. It's normal to feel your skin and tissue pull and stretch a bit with these exercises, but be careful not to make any sudden vigorous movements until the incision has healed and the drain has been removed. Repeat these exercises 3 or 4 times a day.

If you feel sore, numb or tingling

If surgery has irritated some of your nerve endings, you may feel sore or numb, or you may feel a tingling or burning on the back of your arm or in the area around your shoulder, under your arm and down your side and ribs. These feelings may increase a few weeks after surgery. Keep doing the exercises unless you notice an increase in swelling or tenderness. If this happens, tell your doctor. Sometimes gentle rubbing or stroking the area with your hand or with a soft cloth can help make it feel better.

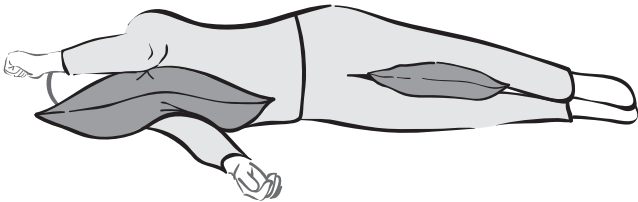
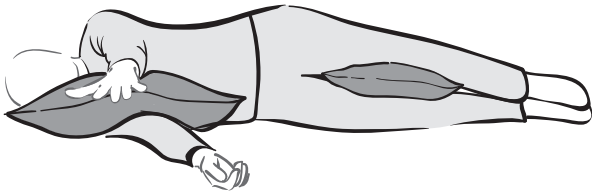
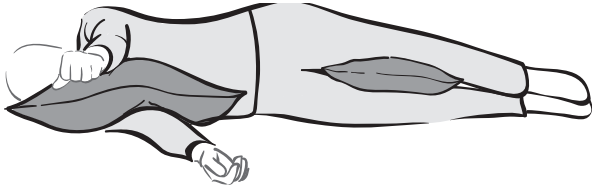
Deep breathing

Deep breathing is an important part of your recovery and helps expand your chest wall. It helps with relaxation 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. Do not tense your shoulders or neck.
3. Relax and breathe out slowly and completely.
4. Repeat 4 or 5 times.

Pump it up

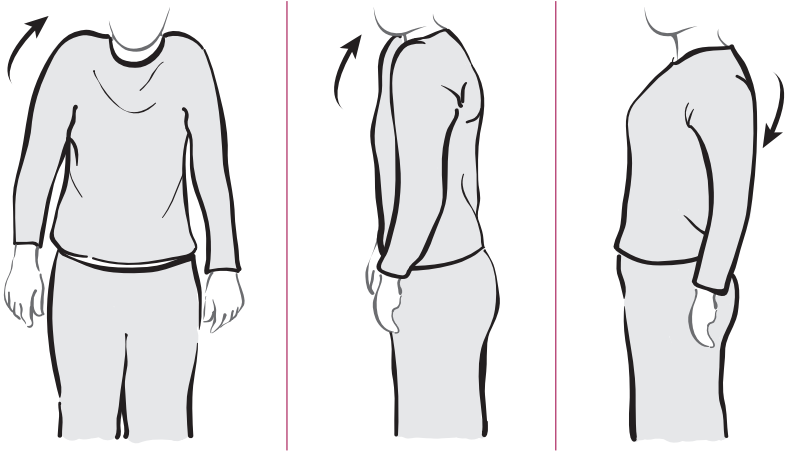
This exercise helps reduce swelling after surgery by using your muscles as a pump to improve the circulation in your affected arm (on the same side as your surgery).



1. Lie on your unaffected side with your affected arm straight out, above the level of your heart. Use pillows if you need to. Or sit in a chair with good back support with your arm supported by pillows.
 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.
- ✔ Sit in a chair with good back support and your arms supported by pillows. Repeat the exercise with hands and arms on both sides.

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, and then slowly drop them down and relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.
2. Gently rotate both shoulders forward and up, and then slowly back and down, making a circle. Keep your chin tucked in slightly. Switch and repeat in the opposite direction.
3. Repeat 5 to 10 times in each direction.

Arm lifts

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



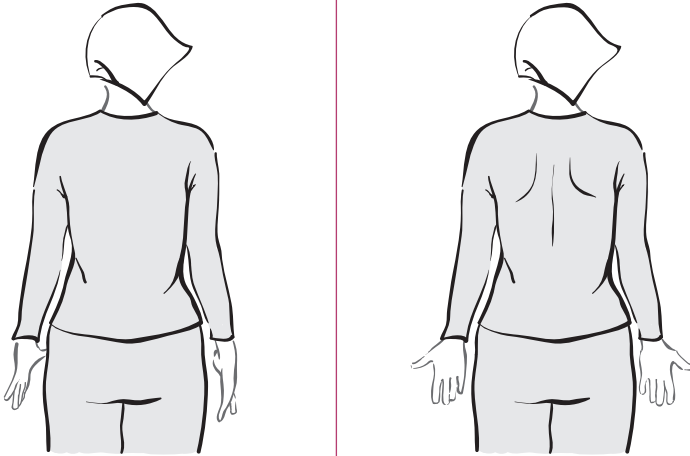
1. Clasp your hands together in front of your chest. Point your elbows out.
2. Slowly lift your arms upward until you feel a gentle stretch.
3. Hold for 1 to 2 seconds, and then slowly return to the start position.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

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



Shoulder blade squeeze

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



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 5 to 10 seconds and practise your deep breathing while holding this posture. Relax and return to the start position.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Help reduce swelling after surgery

At the end of the day, or during the day when you have some time, prop your arm up on a pillow to help reduce swelling after surgery.

First stage of healing

The first 6 weeks after surgery

Starting your second week after surgery, or when your drain has been removed, it's important to try to get back the full use of your shoulder. Start with the exercises in this section, and do them 1 or 2 times a day. Once you are able to move your arms above your head more easily, move on to the exercises in the next section, Advanced Exercises for the First Stage of Healing. By the end of this first stage, you should have full movement of your affected arm and shoulder. But listen to your body. You shouldn't feel worse after the exercises.

Talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team before starting any of these exercises.

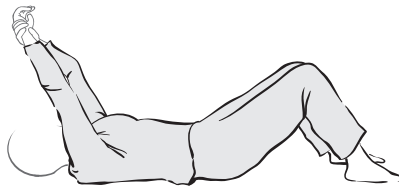
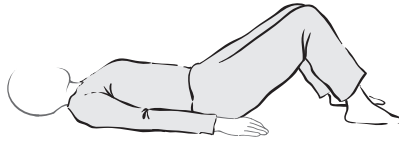
Avoid heavy lifting

During this stage of healing, don't lift anything heavier than about 5 kg (10 lb) – this amount may depend on the surgery you had.

As well as these exercises, keep doing the shoulder blade squeeze exercises that you were doing right after surgery.

Arm reach

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



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. Raise your arms up and back toward your head until you feel a gentle stretch in the chest and underarm.
4. Hold for 2 to 5 seconds. Lower your arms.
5. Repeat 5 times.

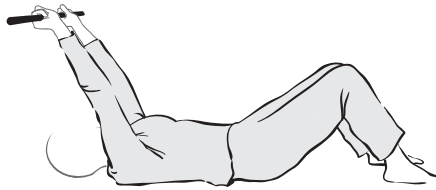
If you feel any pain or pinching, lower your arms and rest.

✔ First use the hand on the side of your body that's less sore to grasp the wrist of your other arm. Then try this exercise using the hand on the side that's more sore if you can. After a few tries with the first arm, you might be able to do the other side.

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.

Position 1



1. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Hold the wand with both hands. Your palms should be facing down, and your hands should be as wide apart as your shoulders.
2. Lift the wand over your head as far as you can until you feel a stretch. Your unaffected arm will help lift the wand.
3. Hold for 5 seconds. Lower arms.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

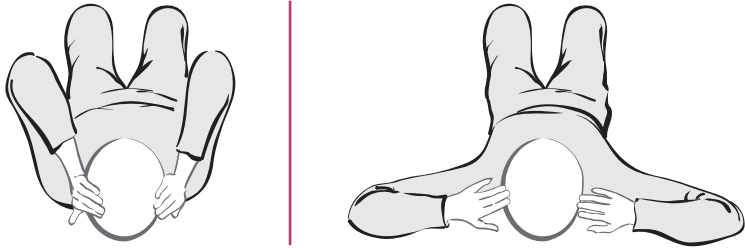
Position 2

Repeat with palms still facing down but hold the wand slightly wider apart than your shoulders.

- ✔ Place the wand on an angle so that the lower arm holds the bottom of the wand and helps the upper arm at the top of the wand to lift up. Repeat with the other arm at the bottom of the stick.

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. If you feel pain or pinching in your shoulder, place a small pillow behind your head, above (not under) your affected shoulder.



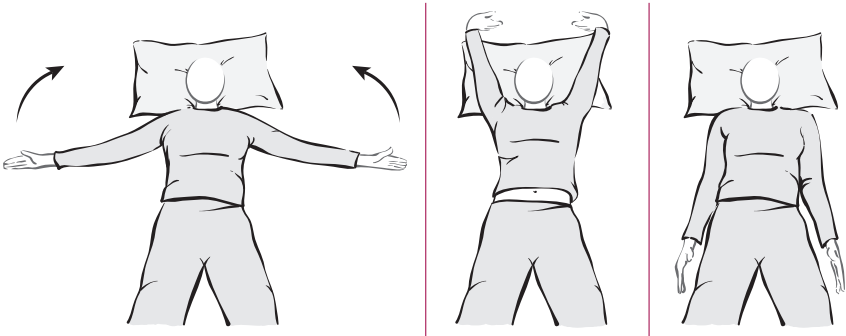
1. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Touch your fingertips to your ears with your elbows pointed to the ceiling. (If you can't comfortably put your hands at your ears, place your fingers on your forehead, palms facing each other.)
2. Move your elbows apart and down to the floor. Hold for 5 seconds.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

If it's too hard to move your elbows down, place a folded towel on each side of the floor where your elbows will lower. When it starts to feel better, you can reduce some of the folded layers. Eventually the towels can be removed.

- ✔ If you 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 if you start to feel pain or pinching, lower your arms and rest.



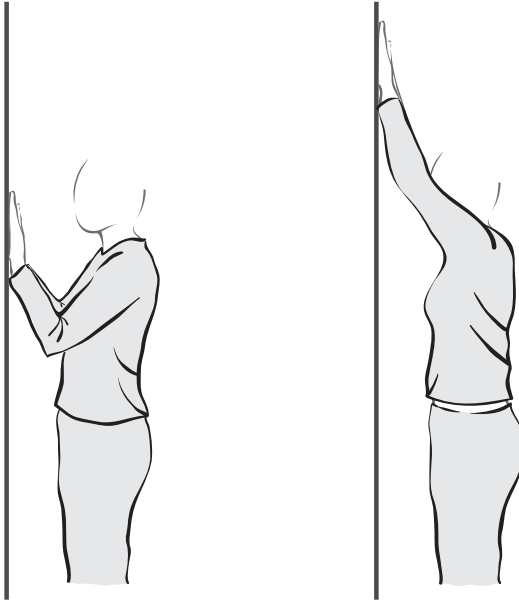
1. Lie on your back and extend your arms out at your sides.
2. Move them up over your head, leading with your thumbs, eventually touching your fingers at the top, and then move your arms back down to your sides (as if you're making an angel in the snow).
3. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

✔ If you 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.

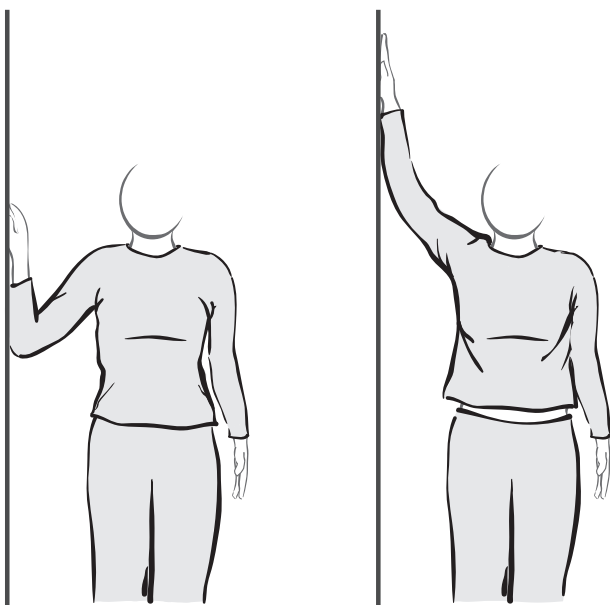
Wall climbing

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.



Facing the wall

1. Stand facing the wall, about 30 cm (12 in) away. 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 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.
 3. Return to the start position.
 4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.
- ✔ Repeat this exercise with your other arm.



Side wall stretch

1. Stand with your affected side to the wall, about 60 cm (24 in) from the wall so you can touch the wall 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. 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.
3. Return to the start position.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Avoid this exercise if you feel a pinch in the top of your shoulder when walking your fingers up the wall.

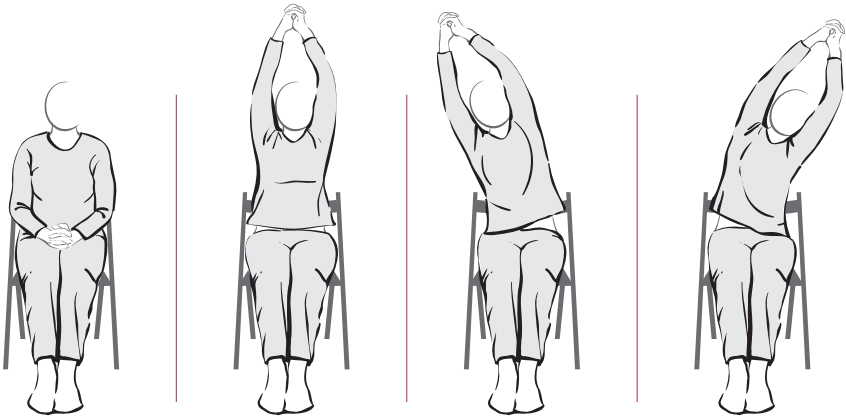
- ✔ Do this exercise first with one arm. Then turn around to face the other way and repeat with your other arm.

Advanced exercises for the first stage of healing

Once you're getting better movement in your shoulder, try these more advanced stretches.

Side bends

This exercise 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. Slowly lift your arms over your head. Bend your elbows slightly.
3. When your arms are above your head, bend at your waist and move your body to the right. Hold for 5 seconds. Use your right hand to gently pull your left arm a little farther to the right. Keep yourself firmly planted on the chair. Take a deep breath in and out.
4. Return to the centre and then bend to the left, using your left hand to pull your right arm farther.
5. 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.

Other activities

It's safe to do light housework during the first 6 weeks after surgery. Do only short periods at a time and rest in between. You can start heavier activities after 6 weeks. Always let pain be your guide - a little discomfort is OK but more pain could mean you're doing too much.

Second stage of healing

From about 6 weeks after surgery

As you feel stronger, you can gradually start doing strengthening and general conditioning exercises. For some women, this means getting back to their old exercise routine, but for others it may mean trying out some new activities.

Talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team about starting a specific strengthening program or aerobic exercise, and ask if there are any special safeguards you should take.

If you have pain, your shoulder is tight or your hand or arm begins to swell, talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team.

Strengthening

You can keep building your strength by slowly getting back to household chores, gardening or yardwork.

Within 4 to 6 weeks after surgery, you can start doing your strengthening exercises with light weights of 500 g to 1 kg (1 to 2 lb). If you don't have any light weights, you can use an unopened soup can or a plastic bottle filled with water. Check with your doctor or physiotherapist to decide what weight is best for you. They can also suggest strengthening exercises for the upper body.

But it is important to build up slowly. If you don't exercise for several days, reduce the amount of weight slightly and build up again.

General conditioning

Regular aerobic exercise is any exercise that gets your heart and lungs working harder and improves your general physical condition. It can help 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, cross-country skiing and dancing are all examples of aerobic exercise.

Talk with your healthcare team about how much physical activity is right for you. Work toward being able to do 30 minutes of moderate activity most days of the week. 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.

Axillary web syndrome (cording)

In the weeks soon after surgery, some women have pain that feels like a tight cord or cords pulling from their armpit down their arm. This is called axillary web syndrome (AWS), or cording. AWS appears as tender, cord-like structures below the skin in the armpit area and down 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 part of the lymphatic system or small veins that have 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. In most cases, cording goes away on its own over time.

Lymphedema

As part of your ongoing recovery following surgery, you should be aware of the possibility of lymphedema and act quickly if you notice any signs of swelling. Lymphedema is swelling in the affected arm, hand or chest wall caused by a buildup of lymph fluid. The swelling happens because lymph nodes, which normally act as filters, aren't able to do their job as well because they've been removed by surgery or they've been damaged by radiation therapy or the cancer itself. Lymphedema is different from the temporary swelling in the breast, armpit and arm that can happen just after surgery.

Lymphedema 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. It's easier to manage if you get help for it early.

Watching for signs of lymphedema

The start of lymphedema can be hard to notice, but it's very important to treat it quickly. Tell your doctor right away if you notice swelling in your hand, arm or chest wall – even if it happens years after treatment. Some other signs to watch for are:

- feeling of fullness, puffiness or heaviness in your arm
- decreased flexibility of movement in your hand, wrist or arm
- jewellery (including watches) feeling tight even though your weight hasn't changed
- problems fitting your arm into your sleeves
- redness or increased warmth, which may mean that you have an infection

Ways to reduce your risk of lymphedema

One of the most important ways to reduce your risk of lymphedema is to maintain a healthy body weight. If you are overweight, you have a greater chance of getting lymphedema, and it may be harder to control or treat.

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

> Tips

- Take special care of your skin and keep your arm moisturized. Try to avoid breaks in the skin that could 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 your other arm 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.

- 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 doctor about the right exercise for you. Increase your exercise gradually, and watch how your body responds.
- Avoid tight-fitting cuffs, watchbands, bracelets and rings, and tight or narrow bra straps. They may prevent the fluid from flowing away from the area and may lead to swelling.

Ways to manage lymphedema

One of the best ways to manage lymphedema is to wear a compression sleeve. Here are other things to consider when you have lymphedema.

> Tips

- Be careful using saunas, steam baths and hot tubs. Some women find that heat can make lymphedema worse.
- Travel with care. Some women find that 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 sleeve, your healthcare team may suggest you wear it when flying.
- Keep your arm moisturized. This helps keep the skin supple and prevents it from becoming dry and cracked especially in winter.
- Wash the area well with soap and water if you get a cut or burn on your arm or hand. Keeping it clean is also important. Your doctor or pharmacist may suggest an antibacterial cream or ointment.

Canadian Cancer Society

We're here for you.

When you have questions about treatment, diagnosis, care or services, we will help you find answers.

Call our toll-free number **1 888 939-3333**.



Ask a trained cancer information specialist your questions about cancer.

Call us or email info@cis.cancer.ca.



Connect with people online to join discussions, get support and help others.

Visit CancerConnection.ca.



Browse Canada's most trusted online source of information on all types of cancer.

Visit cancer.ca.

Our services are free and confidential. Many are available in other languages through interpreters.

Tell us what you think

Email cancerinfo@cancer.ca and tell us how we can make this publication better.

Canadian Cancer Society offices

British Columbia and Yukon

565 West 10th Avenue
Vancouver, BC V5Z 4J4
604-872-4400
1-800-663-2524
inquiries@bc.cancer.ca

Alberta/NWT

325 Manning Road NE, Suite 200
Calgary, AB T2E 2P5
403-205-3966
info@cancer.ab.ca

Saskatchewan

1910 McIntyre Street
Regina, SK S4P 2R3
306-790-5822
ccssk@sk.cancer.ca

Manitoba

193 Sherbrook Street
Winnipeg, MB R3C 2B7
204-774-7483
info@mb.cancer.ca

Ontario

55 St Clair Avenue W, Suite 500
Toronto, ON M4V 2Y7
416-488-5400

Quebec

5151 de l'Assomption Blvd
Montreal, QC H1T 4A9
514-255-5151
info@sic.cancer.ca

New Brunswick

PO Box 2089
133 Prince William Street
Saint John, NB E2L 3T5
506-634-6272
ccsnb@nb.cancer.ca

Nova Scotia

5826 South Street, Suite 1
Halifax, NS B3H 1S6
902-423-6183
ccs.ns@ns.cancer.ca

Prince Edward Island

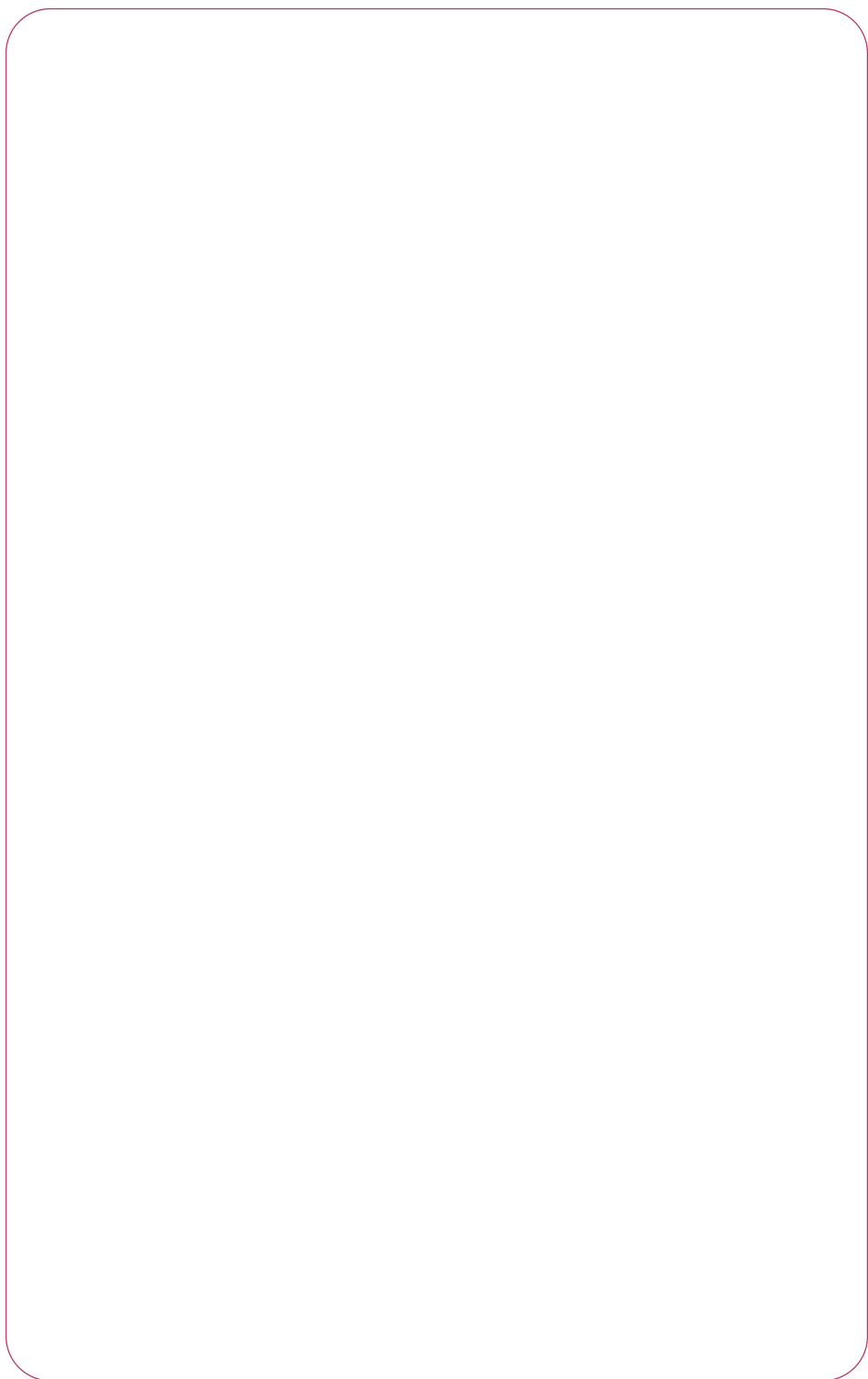
1 Rochford Street, Suite 1
Charlottetown, PE C1A 9L2
1-866-566-4007
info@pei.cancer.ca

Newfoundland and Labrador

PO Box 8921
Daffodil Place, 70 Ropewalk Lane
St John's, NL A1B 3R9
709-753-6520
ccs@nl.cancer.ca

Notes

Notes



What we do

The Canadian Cancer Society fights cancer by:

- doing everything we can to prevent cancer
- funding research to outsmart cancer
- empowering, informing and supporting Canadians living with cancer
- advocating for public policies to improve the health of Canadians
- rallying Canadians to get involved in the fight against cancer

Contact us for up-to-date information about cancer and our services or to make a donation.



Canadian
Cancer
Society



1 888 939-3333 | cancer.ca
TTY 1 866 786-3934

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 2015.