



Mary A. Stanley, MD, FACS  
Breast Surgery

## Exercises After Breast Surgery

### Why do I need to exercise?

You will need to exercise the arm on the same side as your surgery for several reasons.

After Lumpectomy:

- ◆ To have enough range of motion to resume normal activities.
- ◆ To get enough range of motion to be positioned correctly for radiation treatment.

After Mastectomy:

- ◆ To have enough range of motion to resume normal activities.
- ◆ To prevent or diminish arm swelling.

After Axillary Dissection:

- ◆ To prevent or diminish arm swelling.
- ◆ To enhance lymph drainage.
- ◆ To improve range of motion.

### When do I start to exercise my arm?

It is important to allow enough time for healing to occur so that you don't injure yourself after surgery. Your doctor will let you know when you can start exercises. Generally, it is after any drains are removed and the incision looks well on its way to healing, often as early as 5-7 days.

It is common for most patients to experience some pain and stiffness after surgery. The onset of pain should not prevent or interfere with this exercise program. The most important activity after surgery is early movement of the shoulder and trunk.

### To reduce risk of lymphedema after axillary dissection:\*\*

- ◆ Do not ignore any increase of swelling in the arm, hand, fingers or chest wall.
- ◆ Always inform nurses, physicians and technicians of your surgery so they can avoid taking blood pressure, or giving vaccination or injection in an affected arm or hand. To the extent possible avoid having an IV placed in the affected arm.
- ◆ Keep arm clean. Use lotion (Eucerin, Nivea) if skin is dry.
- ◆ Wear SPF 30 or greater sun screen.
- ◆ Carry heavy handbags or bags with over-the-shoulder straps on the other arm. Avoid very heavy lifting with the affected arm. Light weights are encouraged.
- ◆ Do not wear tight jewelry or elastic bands around the affected fingers or arm(s).
- ◆ Avoid extreme temperature changes when bathing, washing dishes or sunbathing.
- ◆ Avoid any trauma (bruising, cuts, sunburn, or other burns, sports injuries, insect bites, cat scratches). If any of these occur, wash the injury and apply antibiotic ointment. If there is redness or yellow-green drainage call your doctor.
- ◆ When manicuring nails push the cuticles back rather than cutting them.

**\*\* Note: these restrictions do not apply to patients who had only sentinel lymph node biopsy**

## What is Lymphedema?

In simple terms, lymphedema is a swelling of an area of the body. This can be the arm, trunk or breast. It is caused by excess fluid accumulating when lymphatic channels are blocked. Any breast cancer surgery patient who has had surgery and/or radiation risks developing lymphedema and its complications. Radiation therapy to the underarm area may also cause lymphedema. Thanks to improvements in surgical and radiation techniques, lymphedema is much less common than it used to be. Education and therapy is available for those at risk or those who develop symptoms.

## What exercises should I do?

- ◆ Arm Stretches
- ◆ Arm Circles
- ◆ Finger Walking
- ◆ Light weights (5-8 lbs)/arms

## How often do I do these exercises?

Once your doctor tells you to begin the exercises, do them three times a day for the first 2 weeks. If your normal range of motion has not returned by that time, call Dr. Mary Stanley's office at 802-878-4410. Physical therapy for range of motion, swelling and scar massage is available at any time after treatment.

## What other restrictions are there for my arm?

No lifting more than 10 pounds for the first month after surgery. Do not wear tight fitting tops/sleeves on the operative side arm. Use your other arm for carrying your shoulder bags. No blood drawing or blood pressures if you had an axillary node dissection. Do not chew your fingernails or cut them too short on the operative side. Wash any cuts to that arm right away and put antibiotic ointment on with a band-aid. Call your doctor if it becomes red, hot or painful.

## What can I do with that arm?

**You can:**

- ◆ Wear loose jewelry (your rings are OK if they aren't too tight)
- ◆ Do your normal activities
- ◆ Paint your nails, get a manicure
- ◆ Light weights 5-8 pounds.

## Arm Stretches:

With your arm straight, slowly raise it in front of you until you feel gentle resistance or discomfort. Hold there and count to 5 (1-1000, 2-1000, 3-1000, etc). Slowly, lower it back down to your side. Repeat 2 more times.

With your arm straight, slowly raise it out to your side until you feel gentle resistance or discomfort. Hold there and count to 5. Slowly lower is back down to your side. Repeat 2 more times.

With your arm straight, slowly raise it out behind you until you feel gentle resistance or discomfort. Hold there and count to 5. Slowly, lower is back down to your side. Repeat 2 more times.

## **Arm Circles**

With your arm straight, slowly raise it in front of you until you feel general resistance or discomfort. Rotate your arm in a circular pattern – like you were circling a basketball with it. First to the left for 5 circles, then to the right for 5 more. Gently lower your arm back to your side. Repeat the circles with your arm out to your side and again with your arm extended out behind you.

## **Finger Walking**

Stand near a wall with your arm straight out in front of you. Let your fingers touch the wall. Gently “walk” your fingers up the wall. Stop at the point where you feel gentle resistance or discomfort, and walk your fingers back down the wall. Repeat with your arm out to the side. Repeat this exercise “walking” the palm of your hand up the wall.

**When you first start, you may find doing these exercises in a warm shower is more comfortable.**