



Exercises after Breast Reconstruction with a DIEP Flap

Physiotherapy



This leaflet contains advice about exercise and returning to normal activities after your operation. Which will help you make a good recovery.

You have recently had surgery to reconstruct your breast using skin from around your tummy area. This procedure may be to reduce your risk of cancer, treat your cancer or after your cancer treatment.

The following exercises are recommended because they are known to reduce the risks of developing:

- **Shoulder stiffness or weakness**
- **Swelling in the arm (lymphoedema)**
- **Weakness of the tummy muscles which can cause bad posture and back pain**

The Exercises

Early

These should begin within the first few days after your operation.

Repeat each exercise five times and try to do each set two or three times a day on the affected arm.

Exercise 1

Shrug your shoulders up to your ears and then relax.

Exercise 2

Rest your hand on your shoulder and raise your affected arm forwards so that your elbow is at the same level as your shoulder and then lower slowly.



Exercise 3

Rest your hand on your shoulder but this time take your elbow out to the sides until it reaches the level of your shoulder and then lower slowly.



Some discomfort at the drain site can be expected when you do these exercises and doing them gently will not cause any damage.

Abdominal Exercises

Muscles from your tummy have not been affected by your operation but they may feel a little tight and weak. These muscles are important for your posture and it is a good idea to make sure that they become strong and supple again to reduce your chance of developing back pain.

Try to do these exercises every day. You should do them lying on your back with knees bent.

Exercise 1

Gently arch your lower back away from the bed keeping your chest and upper back still. Hold for a few seconds. Then slowly flatten your back against the bed by tightening your tummy muscles. Hold this flattened position for a few seconds. Repeat this 10 times.



Exercise 2

Keep your knees together. Slowly lower your knees to one side as far as you can. Hold for a few seconds. Bring the knees back up to the middle and repeat towards the other side. Repeat this 10 times.



Later Exercises

When your drains have been removed you can begin to progress your exercises.

Now is the time to gradually work towards full movement in your shoulder. You should also feel ready to start to stand up straight. Though variable, most people can lie flat within 2 weeks of their operation. A gentle stretching sensation around your new breast and tummy scar is not harmful. In fact, this actually helps the scars to heal.

Exercise 1

Gently raise straight arms up and over your head if you are able and lower. You may find this easier to do lying on your back.



Exercise 2

Gently raise straight arms away from your side as far as you can and lower.



Exercise 3

Slowly reach your hand behind your back as if doing up a bra.

Exercise 4

Place your hands behind your neck and raise your elbows. Move them gently towards each other and then slowly stretch them back as far as you can.

Repeat each exercise five times, and each set several times during the day, until you have regained full movement in your shoulder. This may take several weeks to achieve.

Whilst exercises specific to your surgery are important for your recovery, it is clear that physical activity in general has a powerful effect on preventing certain cancers, particularly breast and bowel. Evidence also supports exercise protects against diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure not to mention helping maintain a healthy weight.

Your physiotherapist will be happy to help you achieve your activity goals or guide you with becoming more active safely. Consider the use of the Macmillan 'Get active, feel good' booklet to help set goals.

Please do not hesitate to contact the physiotherapy department if you would like help improving movement, strength, swelling and need advice on cording, returning to activity and sport or other queries.

General Advice - Returning to Activities

There are no hard and fast rules as to when you can return to work, sports and hobbies. People heal differently and have differing amounts of energy. Remember to progress activities slowly and listen to your body.

Tiredness and feeling a bit down are both quite normal after surgery so remember to get plenty of rest for the first few weeks at home.

Walking

By the time you are ready to go home you should be able to stand and walk tall without too much discomfort from the scar on your tummy. Walking is a good exercise to maintain or improve general health after an operation and short daily walks when you get home will help. It will also help reduce fatigue.

Household Tasks

For the first six weeks, try to avoid heavy and repetitive tasks that may cause rubbing over your wound such as ironing and vacuuming.

Driving

You must not drive until you have full control of a vehicle. This will take around six weeks.

Work

The best time for you to return to work will depend on the kind of job that you do. For sedentary type work you may feel ready to go back by six weeks but if you do a physically active job it will take longer. Your surgeon or physiotherapist will be able to advise you on this.

Lifting

Start by lifting only light objects (around one kilogram), such as half a kettle of water.

Try to avoid heavier and repetitive tasks that may cause rubbing over your wound such as ironing and vacuuming.

As you're able to lift your arm more, you can increase the amount of weight you lift, take it easy and progress this gradually.

Sport/leisure

If your scars have healed and you have good shoulder movement you may begin swimming at six weeks. It is safe to exercise your legs and unaffected arm as soon as you feel able, but you should wait for six weeks before lifting light weights in the gym or doing tummy strengthening exercises. Most other leisure activities can be started within two months.

Sex

It is common to feel tired after surgery, but a diagnosis of breast cancer does not stop your sex drive. However, it is sensible to wait until your wounds have healed before resuming sex.

There will be changes in the way your new breast feels. Try to talk about this with your partner and perhaps explore new ways of making love.

We all have different lifestyles and your surgeon or physiotherapist will be pleased to try to answer any questions you may have special to you.

Frequently asked questions

Will I have a wound drain? How long will I have the drain for?

You will have the breast drain out day 2 after your operation. You will have 2 drains in your tummy. One will be removed on day 2 and the other normally on day 3 after your operation. After the drains are removed you are expected to wear a binder around your tummy for 6 weeks.

How will my pain be managed?

Please talk to the nurse looking after you if you are in pain after your operation. We must ensure your comfort prior to mobilising. Also note, at rest, your pain is likely to be better than when you move. We will provide medication for you to go home with to ensure your pain is managed. It is normal to experience some discomfort after exercising, this shows that you are progressing and stretching. However, exercises should not be painful and they should be done gently. You may wish to take some painkillers 30 minutes before exercising.

Will I have changes in feeling?

It is quite common to experience numbness, tingling or extra sensitivity down the inner arm. This usually subsides after a few months

What is cording?

It is quite common to develop tight bands / cords in and around your armpit following breast surgery. Although these may feel a little uncomfortable when you move the arm fully it is very important that you continue with your exercises as these will help to stretch the cords. Your physiotherapist can advise you if they become troublesome.

When can I shower?

As soon as your drain is removed you can shower.

How long should I wear the sports bra/corset for?

You should wear your sports bra or corset day and night for 6 weeks.

What about if I have an implant?

This will not change your rehabilitation plan. During the first week you should remain cautious of moving your shoulder beyond 90 degrees from your body. Drains will stay in for two weeks irrespective of drainage with an implant.

Useful Resources:

Physiotherapy ----- 01792 703985
Julia Warwick ----- 01792 703975
Plastics dressing clinic ----- 01792 703857

Macmillan 'move more'
Breast cancer care
Breast Cancer Now
CancerFit blog

The BAPS app Wales

Couch to 5km

NHS Pilates

Canolfan Llosgiadau a Llawfeddygaeth Blastig Cymru
Welsh Centre for Burns and Plastic Surgery



GIG
CYMRU
NHS
WALES

Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol
Bae Abertawe
Swansea Bay University
Health Board