

USEFUL CONTACTS

Fraser Valley Centre
BC Cancer Agency
13750 96th Avenue,
Surrey, BC
604-930-2098
www.bccancer.bc.ca

MediAlert Canada
2005 Sheppard Ave. East, Suite 800
Toronto, Ontario
1-800-668-1507
www.medicalert.ca

“Abreast in the West” Newsletter
565 W. 10th Avenue,
Vancouver, BC
www.abreastinthewest.ca

“Exercise for Health” guide
www.ualberta.ca
Faculty of Physical Education/
Research/ Laboratories/
Behaviour Medicine Lab/
Scroll down to bottom for PDF

For more information about breast cancer:

www.breastcancer.org
www.breastcancernowwhat.ca

References:

1. S Harris *et al.* Questions and answers on the management of lymphedema related to breast cancer. JAMC. 164 (2): 198-199, 2001.
2. BC Cancer Agency website (www.bccancer.bc.ca).
3. S Harris *et al.* Clinical practice guidelines for the care and treatment of breast cancer:11. Lymphedema. CMAJ. 164(2): 191-199, 2001 Jan.
4. M Holmes *et al.* Physical Activity and Survival After Breast Cancer Diagnosis. JAMA. 293(20): 2479-2486, 2005.
5. Carson, J W et al. Yoga for Women with Metastatic breast cancer: Results from a pilot study. Journal of Pain and Symptom Management 2007, 33: 331-41



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PHYSIOTHERAPY AFTER BREAST SURGERY

SMH Physiotherapy

This booklet gives information about your physiotherapy before and after your surgery. Please feel free to discuss with your physiotherapist.

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BEFORE THE SURGERY

You will see a physiotherapist during the pre-admission clinic. They will talk to you about your physiotherapy after your surgery.

AFTER THE SURGERY

You will see a physiotherapist on the first day after your surgery. They will check your breathing and review your exercises. Please bring your exercise sheet with you.

1. Exercises

a. Breathing Exercises



Your lungs help you breathe. After the surgery, it is important to do deep breathing exercises. This will keep your lungs clear and fully expanded.

Take a deep breath in through your nose slowly, hold for 3 seconds, and breathe out through your mouth. Repeat 10 times every hour while you are awake. Then cough to clear any mucous in your airways. Support your incision firmly with a pillow to make it more comfortable.

E. Weight and Exercise

Exercise will help you maintain a healthy body weight. It will also keep your arm strong and moving well. Both are important to help control swelling in the arm. Physical activity after breast cancer diagnosis may reduce recurrence risk and the greatest benefit has been shown in women who walked on average 3-5 hours per week at an average speed(4).

- Exercises to help maintain your body weight include walking, biking, swimming, light aerobics, and yoga.
- Yoga may also lead to less overall stress and improved quality of life.
- Ask your physiotherapist about stretching and strengthening exercises.
- Do not do push-ups for the first 3-6 months. It puts too much strain on the shoulders.

F. Doctor

Call your doctor right away if you see any of these changes in your arm:

- Sudden swelling, redness, or tenderness.
- Cuts, burns, bruises, or insect bites that become inflamed and do not heal normally.
- Any sign of infection in your arm.

You may want to wear a MedicAlert bracelet or carry an Alert card in your wallet. This will alert health workers of your condition.



C. Keep your arm free of tight objects

You may get swelling if there is anything too tight around your arm. This prevents fluid from returning to the rest of the body.

- Ask to have blood pressure taken on your other arm, if possible.
- Wear a well-fitted bra, clothes that are not too tight, and loose-fitting jewelry.
- Carry your handbag on your other shoulder or in your other hand.

D. Temperature

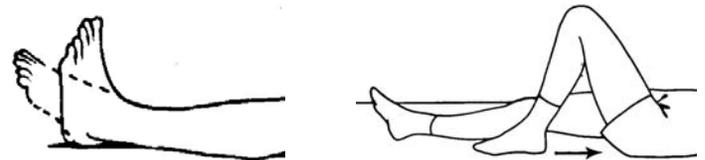
Changes in temperature may cause swelling in your arm.

- Wear warm gloves in cold weather.
- Use warm rather than hot water when bathing or washing.
- Be careful when using saunas or hot tubs.

b. Leg Exercises

It is important to keep the blood moving in your body after the surgery to prevent getting a blood clot in your leg.

Keep the blood moving by pumping your feet up and down at the ankles. Also bend your legs up and down in bed. Do both exercises 10 times every hour while you are awake.



c. Walking

After your surgery, a nurse will help you out of bed. This will keep your lungs clear and blood moving.

d. Arm Exercises

Your physiotherapist will give you a handout of arm exercises to do after your surgery. These exercises will help with your shoulder motion, pain, and swelling.

Do 5-10 repetitions of each exercise, three times a day.

B. Be careful when using your arm

If you lift anything too heavy, you may notice pain or swelling in your arm. Pay attention to how your arm feels. If it is swollen or painful after any lifting, rest and elevate your arm. Try to change or stop the way you are doing that task.

- Carry heavy objects with your other arm. This includes purses, briefcases, and grocery bags.
- Do light housework (for example ironing) for short periods of time only with rests in between. Start with 15 minutes and do more as you are able.
- It is safe to do light housework (such as washing and doing dishes) during the first 6 weeks. You can start heavier activities (such as scrubbing pots and lifting) after the first 6 weeks.
- Use a cart with wheels to carry packages.
- Try to sleep on your back or other side. If possible, sleep with your arm resting on a pillow above the level of your heart to help with the fluid draining from your arm



RECOMMENDATIONS AFTER YOUR SURGERY

A. Take good care of your arm

Be careful with your arm after the surgery. Minor cuts, injuries, burns, or infections to your arm may cause problems. If you get an infection, see your doctor right away.

- Keep your arm clean. Gently dry arms after bathing and use hand cream regularly.
- Ask to have blood tests, injections, and acupuncture in your other arm, if possible.
- Use insect repellent to avoid insect bites. If you get a wasp or bee sting, and your arm becomes red, hot, and swollen, call your doctor.
- Use sunscreen to avoid sunburn. If you get a burn, put your arm in ice or cold water.
- Wear gloves and long sleeves when working outdoors to avoid cuts and scratches to your arm.
- Wear rubber gloves when using any strong soaps or steel wool.
- Wear a thimble when sewing to protect finger from needle pricks.
- Be careful when trimming your nails. Push cuticles back gently after shower. Do not cut cuticles.
- Use an electric razor or depilatory cream to remove hair from under the arms. Maintain the electric razor in good condition.

2. Lymphedema

Lymphedema is swelling in the arm after breast surgery. Normally your body gets rid of extra fluid through the “lymph nodes”. The lymph nodes in your arm are in the armpit. Breast surgery and/or radiation therapy changes the lymph nodes and fluid may stay in your arm.

If you get lymphedema, you may notice swelling anywhere in your arm. Your arm may feel heavy and tight. You may also feel pain in your shoulder.

Not everyone gets lymphedema. Some people get it right away. Others get it months or years later. If you think you have lymphedema, see your doctor or physiotherapist. It is easier to treat if we catch it early.

During the pre-admission clinic, your physiotherapist will measure the size of both arms. The physiotherapist will measure again at your follow-up visits after the surgery to see if there are any changes.

3. Scar management

As your body is healing, you will have scar tissue and swelling around your incision. You can help it heal properly by doing scar massage. This will “loosen up” the scar tissue and swelling so it does not get tight and “stick” to the tissue underneath.

Your physiotherapist will show you how to do the massage.

Start about 2-4 weeks after your surgery, when the scar has healed and it is not too tender. Use the pads of your fingers. Make gentle circular motions along the length of the scar. Continue for 3-4 minutes. A moisturizing lotion may help. Do this everyday for 3-4 months until your scar feels loose and there is no pain.

AT HOME

You will have 3 follow-up appointments with the physiotherapist after your surgery: at 1 month, 6 months, and 12 months after surgery. The physiotherapist will call you at home with the date and time. All appointments will be at the hospital.

At these appointments, your physiotherapist will:

- Measure the size of your arms to check for swelling.
- Go over the scar massage.
- Check the strength and movement in your arms.
- Progress your exercises.

If there are any problems such as stiffness and/or swelling in your arm, you will get treatment for it.

If there are no problems, you will only return for your next follow-up appointment.

It is important to keep these appointments. It is easier to treat lymphedema and/or joint stiffness earlier rather than later.