

Shoulder movement after breast cancer treatment

A practical companion for your rehabilitation plan.

Your care team sets the limits

This is not an immediate post-surgery protocol. Before trying these movements, confirm which are allowed and when. Reconstruction, drains, wound healing, and other procedures can change your restrictions. Follow your own surgical instructions. [1,2]

How high may I reach? _____

Why movement may feel different

Chest and armpit tightness, pain, reduced activity, and radiation-related tissue changes can affect reaching. A tight cord under the skin (cording) can also limit movement. A PT can help identify what is restricting you. [1,7]

Choose a real-life goal

Examples: put on a shirt, wash your hair, reach a shelf, or hold the position needed for radiotherapy. Bring the goal and your surgical instructions to your rehabilitation visit. [6]

My goal: _____

Get help early. Ask for an assessment if pain or stiffness limits daily tasks or treatment positioning. Persistent loss of arm or shoulder movement after surgery or radiation warrants individualized rehabilitation. [6]

General education. These movements and starting amounts are examples to adapt with your clinician, not a requirement to perform every exercise.

Begin with comfortable movement

Use only the options your care team has cleared. [1,2,4]

01 Relaxed breathing

Sit comfortably with your arms supported. Breathe in slowly, allowing your chest and belly to expand, then breathe out gently. Try 3-5 relaxed breaths; avoid straining or holding your breath.

02 Hand and elbow movement

With your upper arm comfortably supported, open and close your hand. Then gently bend and straighten your elbow within your allowed range. An example is 5-10 easy repetitions of each.

03 Small backward shoulder rolls



GENTLY UP

BACK AND DOWN

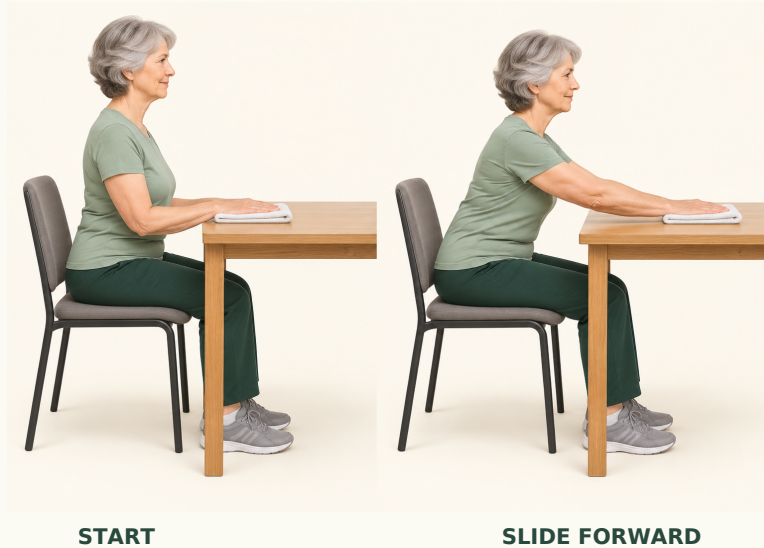
Sit tall with arms relaxed. Circle your shoulders gently forward, up, back, and down. Keep the circle small if your chest feels tight. Try 5 slow rolls without forcing the movement. [2]

Pause and check: stop for increasing pain, wound pulling, or new swelling. A smaller movement or fewer repetitions may be appropriate after advice from your team.

Practice reaching with support

The pictures show examples - your permitted range may be smaller.

04 Seated table slide



Sit facing a stable table. Rest your hands on a towel and slide forward as you gently lean from your hips. Return slowly; do not push through your arms.

Example: 5 easy repetitions, staying within your cleared range. Move the chair closer if needed.

05 Forward wall crawl



Face the wall. Walk your fingers upward only as far as permitted. Keep your shoulder relaxed and your back comfortable. Walk the fingers down slowly.

Example: 3-5 easy repetitions. Use the supported table option if that is more comfortable.

No forcing. A gentle stretch may be acceptable; stop for sharp or increasing pain. If pain persists afterward, or you notice a fluid pocket or wound problem, contact your team before restarting. [3]

Build a plan you can repeat

Progress after clearance

Agree on your exercise frequency with your clinician. As movement improves, your plan may include more reaching and then gradual resistance work. Lymphedema risk does not automatically prohibit strengthening; supervised progression can be appropriate. [8]

Scar care: ask before starting

Wait until the incision is fully healed and your team clears scar massage. Ask for a demonstration; avoid treating an open wound or irritated skin on your own. [2,9]

When to seek medical advice

Report new or increasing swelling or heaviness in the arm, hand, breast, or chest. Redness, warmth, tenderness, or fever needs prompt advice because infection is possible. For new chest pain, severe breathlessness, or fainting, seek emergency care. [5]

My plan with my clinician

Cleared movements: _____

Repetitions / frequency: _____

One weekly activity check: _____

Next visit / question: _____

Sources - click a title to read

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|--|------------------------------------|
| 1 ACS: Exercise after breast surgery | 6 NICE NG101: Rehabilitation |
| 2 MSK: Mastectomy / reconstruction exercises | 7 Breast Cancer Now: After surgery |
| 3 Breast Cancer Now: Exercise guidance | 8 NCI: Lymphedema clinical summary |
| 4 Cancer Council NSW: Arm exercises | 9 NHS: Scars |
| 5 NCI: Lymphedema | |

Reviewed October 26, 2026. Prepared by Benjamin Harris, DPT. This guide supports a conversation with your care team and does not replace your individual treatment plan.