Getting started

Talk to your doctor, breast care nurse, nurse, physiotherapist or exercise physiologist before starting the exercises illustrated in this poster.

The timelines suggested are a guide only and the time that is right for you will vary – your health care team will let you know which exercises to do and when to do them.

Level one exercises can be started the day after surgery. You can usually use your affected arm normally, up to shoulder height, for light activities from the day after your surgery.

Level two exercises can be started after the drains have been removed or when your health care professionals say you can move your shoulder.

These exercises should not cause pain. Let your doctor or breast care nurse know if you experience any pain or discomfort.

Level one exercises

These gentle exercises increase your ability to move your arm and shoulder and improve circulation.

Level one exercises can be done while lying on a bed or sitting in a chair. When you are not doing the exercises you may find it comfortable to rest your arm on a pillow.

Level two exercises

These exercises help make your arm stronger and ease the tightness in your chest and shoulder muscles.

All can be done lying down, sitting in a chair or standing up, except for the wall crawl (exercise I), which works best standing up.

Use your arm for combing your hair, getting dressed, putting on make-up and reaching for light objects – it will improve your arm movements.

With these exercises, you should regain most arm and shoulder movement and function one month after the operation. If improvement is slow, or if you have trouble doing the exercises, your doctor, physiotherapist or exercise physiologist can give you different exercises to try.

Talk to your doctor about when it is safe for you to begin other types of exercise, such as aerobic and strength-training exercises. A physiotherapist or exercise physiologist can then help you develop an individual exercise program. For a free copy of Cancer Council’s Exercise for People Living with Cancer booklet, call 13 11 20 or visit your local Cancer Council website.
Level one exercises

**Shoulder rolls**
Lift your shoulder slowly up towards your ears and roll backwards.

**Wrist exercise**
Support your elbow on a pillow. Keep your hand relaxed and your arm by your side, then bend your wrist back and forth.

**Arm stretch**
Clasp your hands together in front of your chest, keeping your elbows in. Using your strong arm to help, stretch both arms until your elbows are straight out in front at shoulder height then return to your chest. Pull your shoulderblades back as you pull back your elbows.

**Hand squeeze**
Make a fist and squeeze slowly, and then gently open fingers out and relax.

**Hands on head**
Take your hands, still clasped together, to the top of your head. Slowly and gently bring your elbows together and then stretch your elbows backwards. Be aware of pulling your shoulders back but don’t poke your neck forward. At first this exercise will be easier if you lie down. Hold for 5–10 seconds.

**Hands behind neck**
With your head upright and hands clasped behind your neck, stretch your elbows backwards. Hold for 5–10 seconds to stretch the muscles on your chest wall. Try not to bend your upper body while doing this exercise. You can rest in this position, but keep your arms well supported so that the chest muscles can let go. This exercise will help stretch scar tissue and assist with arm drainage.

**Elbow stretch**
Bend your elbow and touch your shoulder with your hand. Then straighten your elbow completely.

**Arm lift**
Keep pushing your hands together so that they support each other as you lift your arms over your head. Lower your hands back towards your hips. The movement should be continuous. Aim to reach your hands above your head within your comfort level. This will be easier to control if you start this exercise lying down.

Level two exercises

**Hand squeeze**
Make a fist and squeeze slowly, and then gently open fingers out and relax.

**Hands on head**
Take your hands, still clasped together, to the top of your head. Slowly and gently bring your elbows together and then stretch your elbows backwards. Be aware of pulling your shoulders back but don’t poke your neck forward. At first this exercise will be easier if you lie down. Hold for 5–10 seconds.

**Wall crawl**
Stand facing the wall with your toes about 20–25 cm from the wall. Place both hands on the wall at elbow height. Use your fingers to pull your hands up the wall, going as far as you can. Slowly slide your hands back down the wall and relax. You may want to mark how high you can reach.

Gradually build up to doing each exercise 10 times 4 times a day