



Canadian Cancer Society  
Société canadienne du cancer

# Exercises after Breast Surgery

*A guide for women*



Let's Make Cancer History

1 888 939-3333 | [cancer.ca](http://cancer.ca)

This guide is for women who've had surgery for breast cancer. Breast cancer happens mainly in women, but each year a small number of men are also diagnosed. We often refer to *women* in the text, but men who've had surgery for breast cancer may also find this booklet helpful.

The information in this booklet is general and shouldn't replace discussions with your healthcare team.

The Canadian Cancer Society acknowledges the input and guidance from the Canadian Physiotherapy Association.



Canadian  
Physiotherapy  
Association

Association  
canadienne de  
physiothérapie

## Table of contents

<b>2</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Before getting started</b>
3	Finding a physiotherapist
<b>4</b>	<b>Right after surgery</b>
	▼ <b><i>The first 1 to 7 days</i></b>
4	Deep breathing
5	Pump it up
6	Shoulder shrugs and circles
7	Arm lifts
8	Shoulder blade squeeze
<b>9</b>	<b>First stage of healing</b>
	▼ <b><i>The first 6 weeks after surgery</i></b>
10	Wand exercise (2 positions)
11	Winging it
12	Wall climbing
14	Snow angels
15	▼ <b><i>More advanced exercises</i></b>
15	Side bends
<b>17</b>	<b>Second stage of healing</b>
	▼ <b><i>From about 6 weeks after surgery</i></b>
17	Strengthening
18	General conditioning
<b>19</b>	<b>Axillary web syndrome (cording)</b>
<b>20</b>	<b>Lymphedema</b>
21	Ways to prevent or manage lymphedema
<b>23</b>	<b>Resources</b>

## Introduction

Exercise is an important part of your treatment and recovery after surgery for breast cancer. It can help you:

- begin your daily activities again (such as bathing and dressing)
- keep movement in your arms and shoulders
- improve muscle strength
- reduce stiffness in your joints
- reduce pain in your neck and back
- improve your overall well-being

Everyone is different and heals at their own pace. Talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team before starting the exercises in this booklet, and let them know about your progress. The timelines suggested are only to guide you. Some exercises can be started right after surgery. Exercises that involve moving your shoulders and arms can usually be started once you've had your drain removed. Strengthening and general conditioning exercises can be added to your routine when you've healed more.

## Before getting started

It's important to talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team before starting any exercises. Your doctor may suggest particular exercises or may suggest that you see a physiotherapist or occupational therapist who can help design an exercise plan for you.

These general guidelines can help you develop a successful exercise routine:

- Wear comfortable, loose clothing.
- Exercise after a warm shower when your muscles are relaxed and warm.
- Breathe deeply and often as you do each exercise.
- Do the exercises until you feel a gentle stretch, not pain.
- Do not bounce or make any quick, jerky moves while stretching.
- Contact your doctor if you have any unusual swelling or pain.
- Don't exercise too much. Exercises and daily activities shouldn't be painful. If you have more pain, discomfort and swelling than before, you may be doing too much.

### Finding a physiotherapist

To find a physiotherapist in your area who works with women who've had breast cancer surgery, visit the Canadian Physiotherapy Association's website at [www.thesehands.ca](http://www.thesehands.ca). You can also ask your doctor for a referral or talk to other women who've had breast cancer.

## Right after surgery

### ✔ *The first 1 to 7 days*

These gentle exercises should be done the first week after surgery or while the drain is still in place. It's normal to feel your skin and tissue pull and stretch a bit with these exercises, but be careful not to make any sudden movements until the incision has healed and the drain has been removed. Repeat these exercises 3 to 4 times a day.

### **If you feel sore, numb or tingling**

If surgery has irritated some of your nerve endings, you may feel sore or numb, or you may feel a tingling or burning on the back of your arm or chest wall (the area around your shoulder, under your arm, down your side and ribs). These feelings may increase a few weeks after surgery. Keep doing the exercises unless you notice an increase in swelling or tenderness. If this happens, tell your doctor. Sometimes gentle rubbing or stroking the area with your hand or with a soft cloth can help make it feel better.

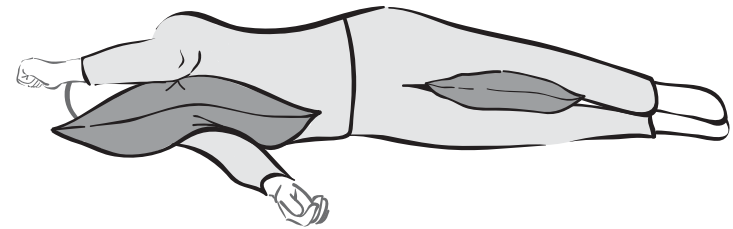
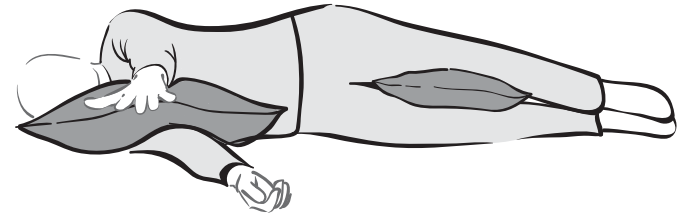
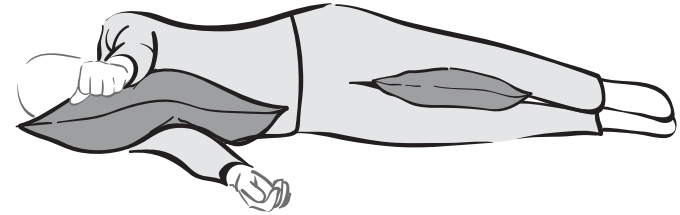
## Deep breathing

Deep breathing is an important part of your recovery and helps expand your chest wall. It helps with relaxation and can remind you to fill your lungs completely.

1. Try lying on your back or sitting and then take a slow, deep breath through your nose. Breathe in as much air as you can while trying to expand your chest and stomach like a balloon.
2. Do not tense your shoulders or neck.
3. Relax and breathe out slowly and completely.
4. Repeat 4 or 5 times.

## Pump it up

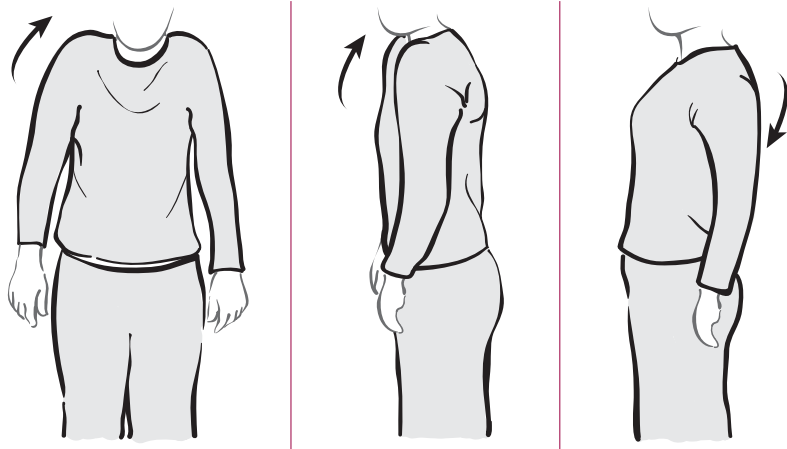
This exercise helps reduce swelling after surgery by using your muscles as a pump to improve the circulation in your affected arm (on the same side as your surgery).



1. Try lying on your unaffected side with your affected arm straight out, above the level of your heart (use pillows if you need to). Or sit in a chair with good back support with your arm supported by pillows.
2. Slowly open and close your hand. Repeat 15 to 25 times.
3. Then slowly bend and straighten your elbow. Repeat 15 to 25 times.

## Shoulder shrugs and circles

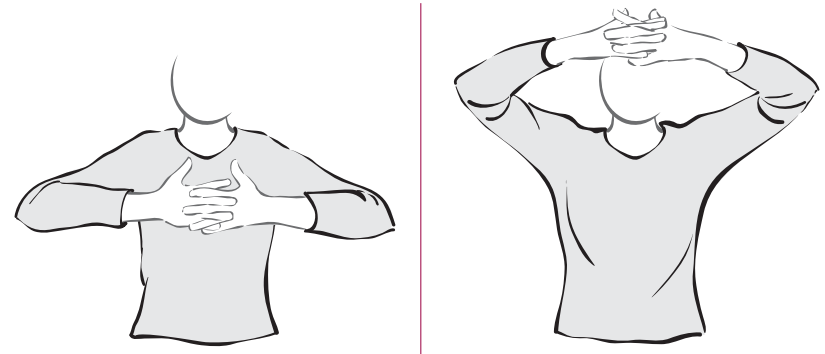
This exercise can be done sitting or standing.



1. Lift both shoulders up towards your ears. Keep your chin tucked in slightly. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds, and then slowly drop them down and relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.
2. Gently rotate both shoulders forward and up, and then slowly back and down, making a circle. Keep your chin tucked in slightly. Switch and repeat in the opposite direction.
3. Repeat 5 to 10 times in each direction.

## Arm lifts

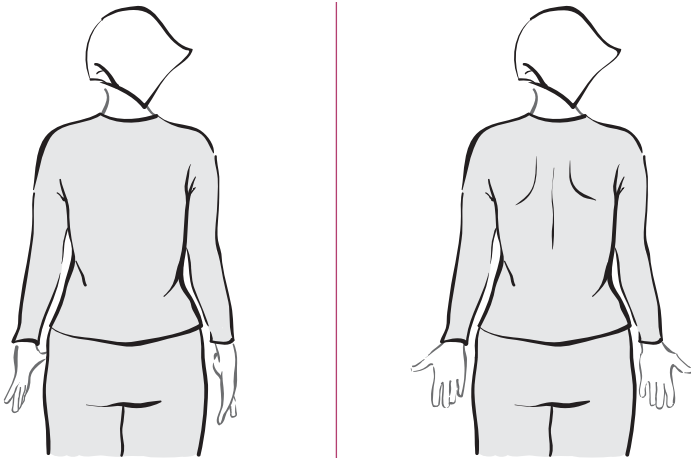
This exercise can be done sitting or standing.



1. Clasp your hands together in front of your chest. Point your elbows out.
2. Slowly lift your arms upwards until you feel a gentle stretch.
3. Hold for 1 to 2 seconds, and then slowly return to the start position.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

## Shoulder blade squeeze

This exercise helps improve movement in your shoulder and your posture.



1. Sit in a chair facing straight ahead without resting your back on the chair, or stand up. Your arms should be at your side with your elbows straight and your palms facing your sides.
2. Open your chest, gently squeeze your shoulder blades together and down and rotate your thumbs so your palms face forward.
3. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds and practise your deep breathing while holding this posture. Relax and return to the start position.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

### Help reduce swelling after surgery

At the end of the day, or during the day when you have some time, try propping your arm up on a pillow to help reduce swelling after surgery.

## First stage of healing

### ▸ *The first 6 weeks after surgery*

Once your drain has been removed, it's important to try to get back the full use of your shoulder. Begin with these easy exercises, and then move on to the more advanced exercises once you feel stronger. By the end of this stage, you should have full movement of your affected arm and shoulder. But listen to your body. You shouldn't feel worse after the exercises.

Talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team before starting any of these exercises.

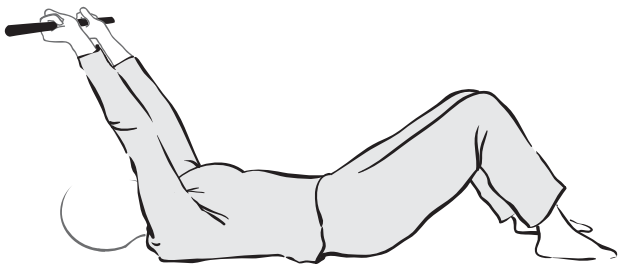
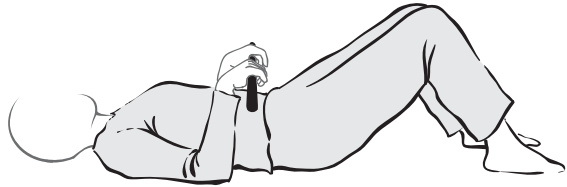
### Avoid heavy lifting

During this stage of healing, don't lift anything heavier than about 5 kg (10 lbs) – this amount may depend on the surgery you had.

## Wand exercise (2 positions)

This exercise helps improve the forward movement of your shoulder. You will need a “wand” to do this exercise – try a broom handle, stick or a cane. You may feel a gentle pull but not any pain or pinching during these exercises. If you do, stop the movement before the point of pain or pinching.

### Position 1



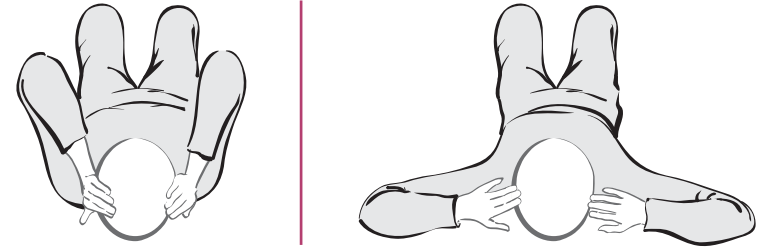
1. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Hold your wand with both hands (your palms should be facing down), and your hands should be shoulder-width apart.
2. Lift the wand over your head as far as you can until you feel a stretch. Your unaffected arm will help lift the wand.
3. Hold for 1 to 2 seconds. Lower arms.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

### Position 2

Repeat with palms still facing down but slightly wider than your hips or shoulders.

## Winging it

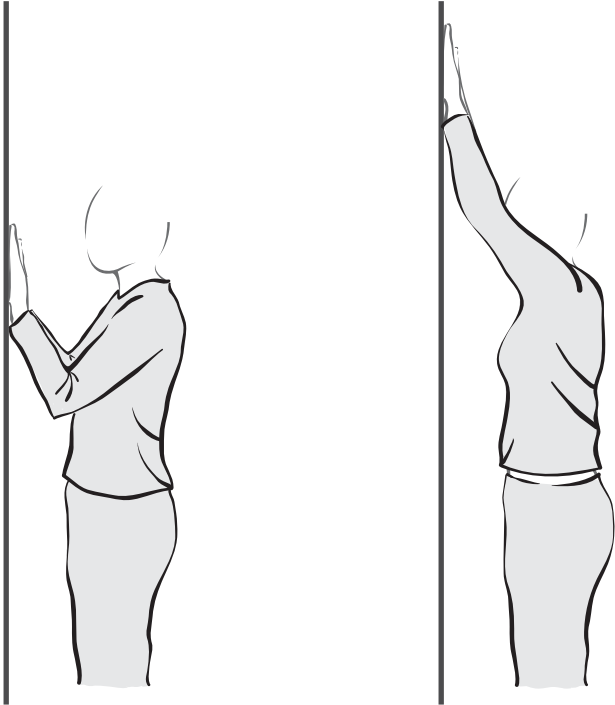
This exercise helps improve movement in the front of your chest and shoulder. It may take several weeks of regular exercise before your elbows get close to the floor. If you feel pain or pinching in your shoulder, place a small pillow behind your head, above (not under) your affected shoulder.



1. Lie on your back with your knees bent. Touch your fingertips to your ears with your elbows pointed to the ceiling. (If you can't comfortably put your hands at your ears, place your fingers on your forehead, palms facing each other.)
2. Move your elbows apart and down to the bed (or floor). Hold for 1 to 2 seconds.
3. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

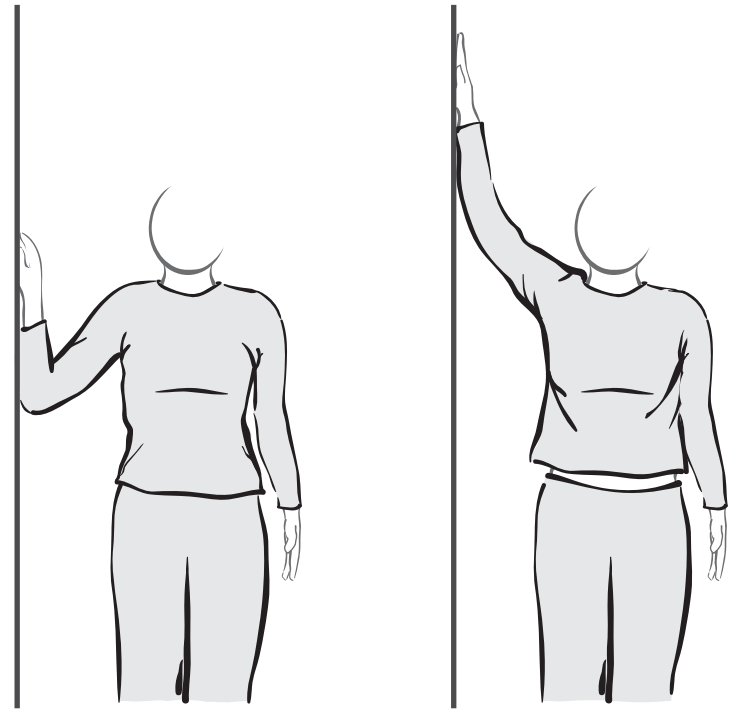
## Wall climbing

This exercise helps increase movement in your shoulder. Try to reach a little higher on the wall each day. This exercise can be done in 2 directions - facing the wall or your affected side to the wall.



### Facing the wall

1. Stand facing the wall, about 5 cm (2 inches) away. Place both your hands on the wall at shoulder level.
2. Use your fingers to climb up or slide as high as you can go until you feel a stretch.
3. Return to start position.
4. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

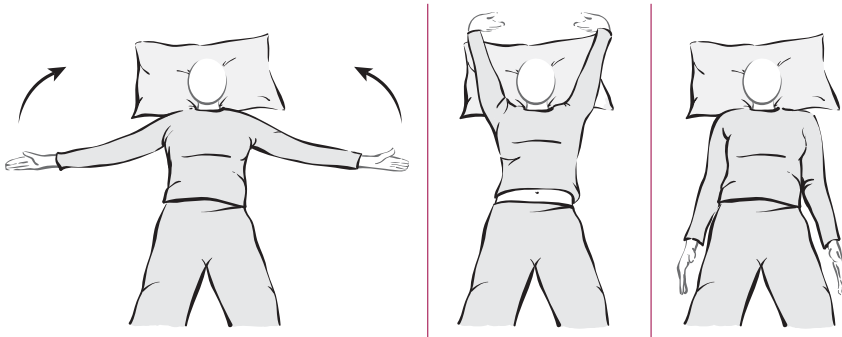


### Side wall stretch

1. Stand with your affected side to the wall, about 2 feet from the wall so you can touch the wall with your fingertips.
2. Walk your fingers up the wall as you do in facing the wall. Do not rotate your body towards the wall. Keep your torso facing forward even if it means you can't go up as high.
3. Lower and repeat 5 to 10 times.

## Snow angels

This exercise can be done lying down on the floor or on a bed.



1. Lie on your back and extend your arms out at your sides.
2. Move them up over your head, eventually touching your fingers, and then back down to your thighs (as if you're making an angel in the snow).
3. Repeat 3 to 5 times.

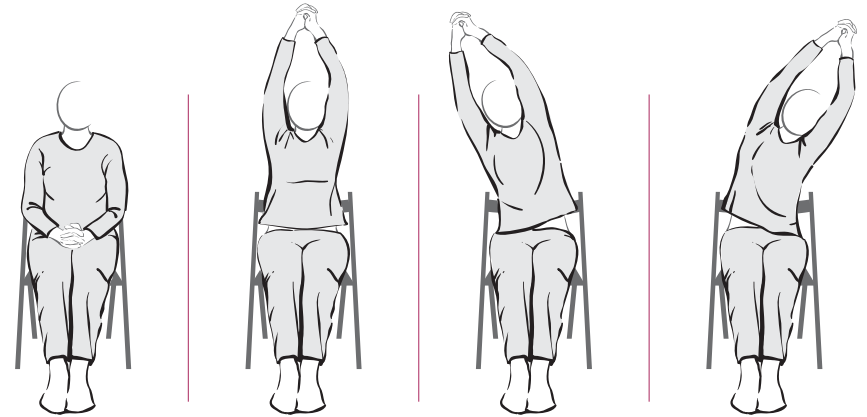
As well as these exercises, keep doing the shoulder blade squeeze exercises that you were doing right after surgery.

## More advanced exercises

Once you're getting better movement in your shoulder, try these more advanced stretches.

## Side bends

This exercise helps improve movement on both sides of your body.



1. Sit in a chair and clasp your hands together in your lap.
2. Slowly lift your arms over your head. Bend your elbows slightly.
3. When your arms are above your head, bend at your waist and move your body to the right. Hold 1 to 2 seconds. Use your right hand to gently pull your left arm a little further to the right. Keep yourself firmly planted on the chair. Take a deep breath in and out.
4. Return to the centre and then bend to the left, using your left hand to pull your right arm further.
5. Repeat 5 to 10 times on each side.

### Achieving full movement of your arm

Continue these exercises until both arms are equally strong and can move easily. This may take 2 to 3 months. When you can reach across the top of your head and touch your opposite ear without feeling a stretch in your underarm, then you have achieved full movement of your arm.

It's safe to do light housework during the first 6 weeks after surgery. Do only short periods at a time and rest in between. You can start heavier activities after 6 weeks. Always let pain be your guide – a little discomfort is okay but more pain could mean you're doing too much.

## Second stage of healing

### ➤ *From about 6 weeks after surgery*

As you feel stronger, you can gradually start doing strengthening and general conditioning exercises. For some women, this means getting back to their old exercise routine, but for others it may mean trying out some new activities.

Talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team about starting a specific strengthening program or aerobic exercise, and ask if there are any special precautions you should take.

If you have pain, your shoulder is tight or if your hand or arm begins to swell, talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team.

### Strengthening

Slowly getting back to household chores, gardening or yardwork are some ways you can keep building your strength.

Within 4 to 6 weeks after surgery, you can start doing your strengthening exercises with light weights (500 g to 1 kg or 1 to 2 lbs). If you don't have any light weights, you can use an unopened soup can or a plastic bottle filled with water. Check with your doctor or physiotherapist to decide what weight is best for you. They can also suggest strengthening exercises for the upper body that are suitable for you.

But it is important to build up slowly. If you don't exercise for several days, reduce the amount of weight slightly and build up again.

## General conditioning

Regular aerobic exercise, which is any exercise that gets your heart and lungs working hard, improves your general physical condition.

It can help with your recovery and has many benefits. It can:

- help improve your cardiovascular fitness – how well your heart, lungs and blood vessels bring oxygen to your muscles – so that you can do physical work for longer periods of time
- help you maintain a healthy body weight
- help you feel better, which may reduce stress and anxiety
- help you as you face the challenges of life after cancer

Brisk walking, swimming, running, cycling, cross-country skiing and dancing are all examples of aerobic exercise.

## Axillary web syndrome (cording)

Axillary web syndrome, which is also called cording, is a problem that may occur after breast surgery. Cording appears as a series of tender, painful cord-like structures below the skin in the armpit region and down your arm. These cords may extend past the elbow to your wrist. If you develop cording, you may notice that it's hard to reach for objects overhead, lift your arm or straighten your elbow.

We don't know the exact cause of cording. The cords may be part of the lymphatic system or small veins that have been damaged during surgery. Cording usually occurs in the early weeks after surgery. Daily shoulder stretching may help the tightness. If you get cording, keep doing your daily stretching to the point of feeling a pull, not pain, and contact your physiotherapist. In most cases, cording goes away on its own over time.

## Lymphedema

As part of your ongoing recovery following surgery, you should be aware of the possibility of lymphedema. Lymphedema is swelling in the affected arm, hand or chest wall caused by a buildup of lymph fluid. The swelling happens because lymph nodes, which normally act as filters, aren't able to do their job as well because they've been removed by surgery, or they've been damaged by radiation therapy or the cancer itself. Lymphedema is different from the swelling in the breast, armpit and arm that can happen just after surgery.

Lymphedema can happen soon after treatment, months or even years later. It can be temporary or become a long-term condition. It's easier to manage if you get help for it early.

### Watching for signs of lymphedema

The start of lymphedema can be hard to notice, but it's very important to treat it quickly. Tell your doctor right away if you notice swelling in your hand, arm or chest wall – even if it happens years after treatment. Some other signs to watch for are:

- feeling of fullness, puffiness or heaviness in your arm
- decreased flexibility of movement in your hand, wrist or arm
- jewellery (including watches) feeling tight even though your weight hasn't changed
- problems fitting your arm into your sleeves
- redness or increased warmth, which may mean that you have an infection

## Ways to prevent or manage lymphedema

These tips on caring for your arm on the side where you had surgery may help prevent lymphedema or help you manage if you already have it.

One of the most important ways to manage lymphedema is to wear a compression sleeve.

### > Tips

- Take special care of your skin. Try to avoid breaks in the skin that could lead to infection.
  - › Keep your arm moisturized. This helps keep the skin supple and prevents it from becoming dry and cracked. Healthy skin can help your body avoid infection.
  - › Wash the area well with soap and water if you get a cut or burn on your arm or hand. Keeping it clean is also important. Your doctor or pharmacist may suggest an antibacterial cream or ointment.
  - › Treat infections as soon as possible. Your doctor may suggest having an emergency supply of an antibiotic at home, just in case.
  - › Stay out of direct sunlight, and wear sunscreen to avoid sunburn, especially on your arm and chest.
  - › Wear insect repellent to avoid bug bites.
  - › Do not cut the cuticles back when you manicure your hands. Push them back.
  - › Be careful when shaving under your arm.
  - › Use your other arm to have blood samples or your blood pressure taken, or for injections, if possible.
  - › Wear work gloves when gardening or doing other outdoor chores.
  - › Wear loose-fitting gloves when working with household cleaning products or when your hands are in water for a long time.
  - › Use a thimble when sewing to protect your fingers from getting pricked by needles or pins.

- Avoid using the arm on the same side as your surgery to lift or carry anything heavy, such as heavy groceries, unless you've built up to doing this regularly.
- Exercise regularly, but don't overdo it. Moving your arm and contracting the muscles as you exercise helps move fluid through your arm. Talk to your doctor about the right exercise for you. Increase your exercise gradually, and watch how your body responds.
- Maintain a healthy body weight. If you are overweight, you have a greater chance of getting lymphedema, and it may be more difficult to control or treat.
- Avoid tight-fitting cuffs, watchbands, bracelets and rings, and tight or narrow bra straps. They may prevent the fluid from flowing away from the swollen area.
- Use saunas, steam baths and hot tubs with care. Heat can make lymphedema worse.
- Travel with care. Some women find that their lymphedema is worse when they travel to a hot climate. If you have a compression sleeve, your healthcare team may suggest you wear it when flying.

## Resources

### To contact the Canadian Cancer Society:

- Call us toll-free at **1 888 939-3333** (TTY: 1 866 786-3934) Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. If you need help in other languages, interpreters are available.
- E-mail us at **info@cis.cancer.ca**.
- Visit our website at **cancer.ca**.
- Contact your local Canadian Cancer Society office.

Our services are free and confidential.



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E-mail us at [publicationsfeedback@cancer.ca](mailto:publicationsfeedback@cancer.ca) if you have comments or suggestions to help us make this booklet more useful for you and other readers.

## What we do

The Canadian Cancer Society fights cancer by:

- doing everything we can to prevent cancer
- funding research to outsmart cancer
- empowering, informing and supporting Canadians living with cancer
- advocating for public policies to improve the health of Canadians
- rallying Canadians to get involved in the fight against cancer

Contact us for up-to-date information about cancer, our services or to make a donation.



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