

# Stretching Exercises after Breast Surgery



MASSACHUSETTS  
GENERAL HOSPITAL

CANCER CENTER

# Stretching Exercises after Breast Surgery

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As you heal after breast surgery, your arm may feel stiff. You need to get your shoulder motion back so your arm will function normally. This booklet contains exercises you can do to help restore your shoulder motion and not feel stiff or tight. This book also contains suggestions for some gentle stretching you may do during the day.

Check with your breast surgeon before starting these exercises. If you had breast reconstruction, also check with your plastic surgeon.

This folder has answers to most of your questions about stretching exercises, and gives you a full set of exercise instructions and pictures to help you make progress.

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# Stretching Exercise Questions

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## Why do I need to do stretching exercises after breast surgery?

- Pain from surgery can keep you from moving your shoulder normally. The less you move your shoulder, the more stiff it can become. Exercises that stretch the tissues around your chest, underarm, and shoulder will help you get your normal motion back. These exercises are important to do every day. We expect that you can regain your full mobility.
- Stretching is a good way to treat “cords” of tissue. Cords are bands of tissue that can form during healing. They can appear in your chest, armpit, down your arm, and across your elbow. These cords are normal after breast surgery and will get better with stretching.

## When may I start exercising my arm and shoulder?

- You may start these exercises when your breast or plastic surgeon thinks you are ready. This is a matter of how you are healing and whether or not you still have drains in your surgical site.
- Even before you start the exercises, try to be aware of your posture. Tuck in your stomach, lift your chest, and think of “being tall” like an ice skater or dancer.

## How do I begin my stretching exercises?

- Once you have permission from your surgeon to begin exercising, start with the first two exercises inside this folder. Gradually add the other exercises so that at the end of that first week you are doing Exercises 1–4.
- When you begin you may feel tight and a bit sore, so begin slowly and gently. Never be forceful or cause pain. The sensation should be a gentle stretch, not an uncomfortable tugging.
- Breathe normally as you exercise — do not hold your breath. Try to keep your shoulder blades relaxed.

## How much stretching should I do?

- Exercises 1–4: twice a day for a total of 10 to 15 minutes each time. You may not be able to do this much at the beginning, but this can be your goal.
- Stretches 1–5 can be done anytime during the day. Try to do each stretch at least once a day.
- Keep doing these exercises once a day for 4 to 6 months to maintain good shoulder motion and flexibility.
- If you have any questions about these exercises, please ask your physical therapist or other member of your treatment team.

## Exercises to Do Twice a Day

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The first set of exercises is done lying down on your back. Lying on your bed is fine. Use a pillow for your head if it is more comfortable. When you are lying down, the weight of gravity will help you stretch more easily.

Do not force any stretches beyond a comfortable, light pull. There should not be any pain — ever.

- Each exercise should be done two times a day, and take about 3 to 4 minutes to complete.
- Total time for all exercises should be about 10 to 15 minutes.
- Stretching every day will help you make the most progress.

### Exercise 1: Overhead Reach



1. Lie flat on your back with your knees bent.  
Relax your shoulders and shoulder blades.



2. Clasp your hands together.  
Raise your arms straight above your chest.  
Stretch your arms toward the ceiling and relax.



3. Slowly and gently move your arms from above your chest to behind your head.



4. Let your knees rotate toward the floor on your \_\_\_\_\_ side until you feel a good stretch along the side of your body.  
Return to the starting position and repeat.

## Exercise 2: Opening Reach



1. Lie flat on your back with your knees bent.  
With your palms facing up, hold a light stick or tube across your hips.  
The tube should be at least 3 feet long.  
You can use a curtain rod, yardstick, ski pole, mailing tube, or similar object.



2. Begin with your hands about shoulder-width apart.



3. Stretch your arms over your head until you feel a comfortable stretch.



4. Rotate your knees to your \_\_\_\_\_ side.



5. Return to the starting position and repeat.  
Each time you repeat the exercise move your hands further apart on the tube for additional stretch.

## Exercise 3: Side Reach



1. Lie flat on your back with your knees bent.  
Hold your tube or stick as in Exercise 2.



2. Raise the tube above your face.



3. Angle your arms to your \_\_\_\_\_ side.  
Rotate your knees toward the floor on your \_\_\_\_\_ side.



4. You can change the angle between your shoulder and body to vary the stretch.  
Repeat the exercise.

## Exercise 4: Inner Arm Stretch



1. Lie flat on your back with your knees bent.



2. Put your hands on top of your head.



3. Let your elbows relax to the sides as far as possible.

Rotate your knees toward the floor on your \_\_\_\_\_ side.

Repeat the exercise.

# Stretches to Do During the Day

The next set of stretches can be done anytime during the day. Be sure you do each exercise at least once a day. Stretch gently — these exercises should never cause pain.

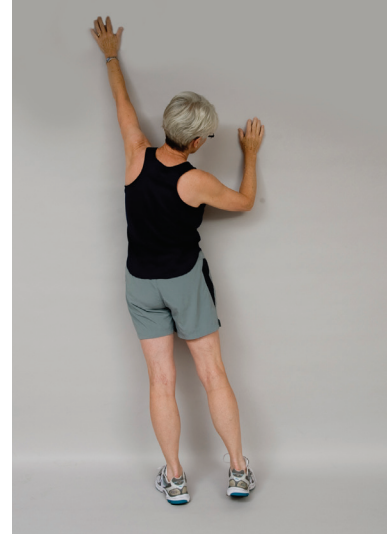
## Stretch 1: Wall Slides



1. Stand facing a wall about 2 to 4 inches away from you. Put your hands on the wall with your elbows bent at a comfortable level.



2. Slide your \_\_\_\_\_ arm straight up along the wall, reaching from your shoulder blade.



3. Relax that arm and reach up with the other arm. Repeat, alternating arms.



4. Go back to the start position. Slide up and out at an angle.



5. Switch to the other arm and repeat the sliding and reaching motion. Alternate arms.



6. Keep changing the angle at which you stretch.



## Stretch 2: Standing Overhead Stretch



1. Stand with your feet about shoulder-width apart for good balance.

Clasp your hands and reach overhead.

2. Stretch up toward the ceiling.

3. Bend side-to-side.

## Stretch 3: Reaching Back



1. Stand with your feet about shoulder-width apart for good balance.

Clasp your hands behind your back at hip level.

2. Try to bring your shoulder blades together.

## Stretch 4: Inner Arm Stretch



1. Stand or sit with your hands on the back of your head.
2. Stretch your arms backward.
3. Try to bring your shoulder blades together.

## Stretch 5: Side Stretch



1. Stand with your arms at your sides and your elbows bent.
2. Rotate your arms outward so your hands move further apart.
3. Try to bring your shoulder blades together.

## Posture



1. Stand in a relaxed posture.  
Think about the position of your body.  
Let your body feel “soft.”



2. Pull in your stomach, lift your chest up, and raise your head so you are looking straight ahead.



3. Imagine that you are getting taller.  
Make your spine as long as you can, as if a string is attached to your head and is pulling you up toward the ceiling.



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