

Advice and Exercises Following an Axillary Dissection (Armpit Surgery)

If you need this leaflet in a different language or accessible format
please speak to a member of staff who can arrange it for you.

اگر به این بروشور به زبان دیگر یا در قالب دسترس پذیر نیاز دارید،
لطفاً با یکی از کارکنان صحبت کنید تا آن را برای شما تهیه کنند.

Jeśli niniejsza ulotka ma być dostępna w innym języku lub formacie,
proszę skontaktować się z członkiem personelu, który ją dla Państwa przygotowuje.

Dacă aveți nevoie de această broșură într-o altă limbă sau într-un format accesibil,
vă rog să discutați cu un membru al personalului să se ocupe
de acest lucru pentru dumneavoastră

如果您需要本传单的其他语言版本或无障碍格式，请联系工作人员为您安排。

إذا احتجت إلى هذه النشرة بلغة أخرى، أو بتنسيق
يسهل الوصول إليه، يرجى التحدث إلى أحد الموظفين لترتيب ذلك لك.

Introduction

You are having surgery that examines and removes lymph nodes from your armpit (axilla). The lymph nodes are part of your lymphatic system. This system is a network of vessels carrying fluid around the body. It takes away waste products from the body's tissues. It also plays an important role in fighting infections. Lymph nodes act as 'filters' and so can trap bacteria but also cancer cells.



(<http://www.cigna.com/knowledge-center/hw/axillary-lymph-nodes-zm2547>)

Your operation is performed when it is known or likely that cancerous cells have spread to your lymph nodes. Sometimes a nerve in the armpit might be affected by the operation. This can cause numbness or a change in feeling in your upper arm. This change is often permanent.

Introduction

You will return from theatre with a tube stitched into the wound attached to a bottle (a drain). This helps to drain any excess fluid from the armpit and is a normal result of the operation. Your surgeon will advise on how long the drain will remain in place.

Before Your Operation

This leaflet outlines precautions you should take and exercises that will help you recover your movement and strength following the operation. There are some **important differences** in the exercises **before and after the drain is removed**.

Your therapist will see you on the ward after your operation and will be happy to answer any questions you may have; this booklet is only a guide.

Exercises When You Have A Drain

Breathing Exercises

Your operation was performed under general anaesthetic, which can put you at a higher risk of developing a chest infection. Performing these exercises as a cycle will open your airways more and to help keep your chest clear of phlegm.

1. Deep Breathing Exercises

Take a deep breath in through your nose, holding for a couple of seconds, then breathe out through your mouth. Repeat 3-4 times.

2. Relaxed Breathing

Gently rest your hand on your tummy. Take a gentle breath in through your nose. Your tummy should rise. Breathe out through your mouth. Your tummy should fall. Repeat 3-4 times.

3. Supported Huffing/Coughing

Bend your knees and hold a towel or a pillow firmly over your tummy to support your wound. Open your mouth widely and force the air out as if you were steaming up a mirror. This helps to bring any phlegm to the back of your throat. You may then need to cough to clear it. Repeat 3 times.

Shoulder Exercises

The following exercises can begin straight away after your operation and continue with them for a week. Complete this cycle of exercises **5** times a day, repeating each one **5** times. Each one should be a slow stretch, taking **5** seconds to complete.

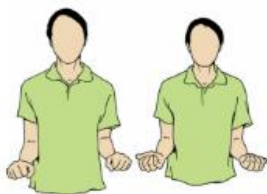
Shoulder Exercises When You Have A Drain



Shrug your shoulders up towards your ears and relax them back down



Bend and straighten your elbows



Turn your hands to face forwards and then backwards



Keeping your elbows bent, bring your arms forward to shoulder height



Keeping your elbows bent, bring your arms forward to shoulder height.

Exercises When The Drain Is Removed

Once the drain has been removed, complete this cycle of exercises **5** times a day, repeating each one **5** times. Each one should be a slow stretch, taking **5** seconds to complete. When full movement returns, repeat the exercises **once a day for one year** after your operation, to maintain your movement. If there is a lot of oozing, redness or pain around your wound, stop the exercises and speak to your physiotherapist, nurse or doctor as soon as possible.



Clasp your hands together and stretch forward up over your head



Take your arms out to the side and clasp your hands together over your head



With elbows bent and hands at your ears bring your arms in front of you then out to the side



Turn your palms to face backwards and take your hands behind your back

Driving

Do not drive for at least **4** weeks after your operation **nor** until you have enough movement and strength to perform emergency action. It is advisable to check with your insurance company before you return to driving.

Everyday activities

For at least the first month you will need help with cooking, housework etc. After **6** weeks your scar should have healed and you can gradually start to use your arm normally. You might feel an aching around your shoulder and neck with certain strenuous activities, but this will get less as your muscles get stronger.

Work

Your doctor or physiotherapist will advise you on when you can return to work; it will depend on your occupation.

Lymphoedema. What is it?

Lymphoedema is chronic swelling caused by a build up of fluid in the tissues. It does not affect all patients, but anyone who has had surgery to their lymph system is at risk of developing it as the flow of fluid can be blocked. Lymphoedema is a long term condition which cannot be cured, but it can be controlled.

Symptoms include:

- Skin feels `stretched` making it difficult to move your arm.
- Heavy and aching feeling in your arm.
- Altered sensations e.g. pins and needles
- Pain in affected arm
- Repeated skin infections in the affected arm.

Care at Home

Reducing the stress on your lymph system

- Look after your skin and try not to wash using very hot or cold water
- Use moisturiser daily to prevent dryness of the skin
- Take precautions to avoid cuts, sunburn or burns to the affected area. Treat cuts and grazes as soon as you can.

Scar Massage

Once your wounds have healed, you can start to massage your scars using an unscented moisturising cream a day. If you are concerned about your scarring, ask your physiotherapist or nurse for advice.

Further advice

The exercises in this leaflet should help you to regain movement and function of your arm and neck. Some people find it easier than others and you may require a course of physiotherapy to help you. If you are struggling with any of the exercises or have any concerns, please contact the therapy team:

Telephone: 0151 430 2231

Email: plasticstherapy@sthk.nhs.uk.

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