Gentle Lymphedema Exercises
You Can Do Following Mastectomy
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Lymphoedema After Mastectomy

Lymphoedema is one of the most common complications after mastectomy. This happens in breast cancer surgeries that involved removal of the lymph nodes. When lymph nodes are removed, the lymph vessels that help in the transport of the lymph are also removed. This results in the disruption in the flow of the lymphatic fluid. Hence, women who undergo mastectomy and are at risk for lymphoedema are advised to perform certain lymphoedema exercises.

Lymphoedema Exercise to Reduce Arm Swelling

Exercise helps in managing lymphoedema as it causes the muscles to contract, pushing the lymphatic fluid into the lymph vessels. Doctors used to be worried with these exercises as they thought that they could worsen the lymphoedema, but there is no evidence to support this. When you exercise it helps the lymph fluid to go back into circulation and therefore is beneficial and reduces the swelling. You should always consult your doctor/specialist before commencing any new exercise routine, it is important that if you have swelling in your arm that you do not leave it and you see your doctor/specialist as soon as you possibly can.

Prepare for Arm Lymphoedema Exercises

The following simple and gentle exercises can help the proteins in lymph fluid to be reabsorbed, and your arm lymphoedema symptoms to reduce. Be sure to discuss your exercise plan with your doctor before you start. You should be referred to a physical therapist who can teach you these exercises, if you need help with a referral, especially if you are not covered by your insurance, please contact the Breast Cancer Foundation as we should be able to help you with this cost.
If you have recently had surgery then post operatively, many women present with reduced shoulder elevation due to pain/muscle guarding/fear. In the early days post operation, depending on what surgery has been performed, it may be that you need to limit elevation to 90° initially. Exercises are all beneficial following surgery, only when wounds are fully healed and when you have regained decent shoulder range of movement and are free of pain/ complications. Immediately post operation you should concentrate on getting your movement back. These exercises will certainly help lymphoedema prevention/ management too. You can certainly work on the ball squeezing exercise straight away. Early days post operation you will be encouraged to move your arm but without any weights. So other than the ball squeezing we would not recommend your starting these exercises earlier than 6 weeks post operation and always under the guidance and advice of a specialist. Do these exercises gently, you are not body building and never exercise to the point of pain.

Always wear your compression sleeve on your affected arm while exercising. Stop exercising if your arm begins to tire, it should never swell, if it does stop exercising completely and get the arm checked out.

Dress in loose, comfortable clothing, style is not important for these exercises. Warm your affected arm and hand before you start to exercise, take a warm (not hot) shower or use a warm compression for about 20 minutes. Be regular about doing your arm lymphoedema exercises, this will aid your recovery and give you the best results.

What you need to get started:

- At set of 1-pound free weights (you could use another object of a similar weight if you do not have any handheld weights, such as a semi filled water bottle.
- Your compression sleeve(s)
- A small flexible ball (available from the Breast Cancer Foundation if you do not have one)
- A hard chair to sit on
- An area big enough to lay down on
Pressure Ball Squeeze – Seated Exercise

The pressure ball squeeze exercise is done while you are seated and is a good way to gradually work into your other exercises. You can do the ball squeeze exercise with your surgery-side arm, as well as with your unaffected arm. If you do not have a ball, clench your fist instead.

Use a flexible ball that is a bit larger than your palm. Your exercise ball should not be heavy and should offer some resistance to your grip. The proper ball will spring back into shape when you release it but will require some pressure to squeeze it. You will feel muscles in your fingers, lower and upper arm working as you do the ball squeeze. This muscle movement should help move excess lymph fluid back into circulation and help you avoid swelling. Remember: Always wear your compression sleeve on your affected arm during exercise.

Here is how to do the pressure ball squeeze exercise:

- Sit or stand with good posture—keep your back and neck straight and your shoulders relaxed.
- Grasp your exercise ball lightly between your palm and fingers. Extend your arm in front of you, holding your arm higher than your heart.
- While keeping your arm elevated, squeeze the ball with your fingers as tightly as you can. Hold the squeeze for about 3 seconds, then release.
- Repeat the ball squeeze exercise 5 to 7 times. If your arm tires quickly, take breaks. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do the ball squeeze several times without resting.
How to do an Elbow Flexion Exercise:

The elbow flexion exercise uses your upper arm muscles, which are close to your axillary lymph nodes. As these muscles work, lymph fluid can be pumped back into your system and absorbed, reducing arm lymphoedema.

You can do the elbow flexion exercise with both arms. Use a 1-pound free weight in each hand during this exercise. You will feel muscles in your lower and upper arm working as you do the elbow flexion.

Here is how to do the elbow flexion exercise: Remember: Always wear your compression sleeve on your affected arm during exercise.

- Sit or stand with good posture—keep your back and neck straight and your shoulders relaxed.
- Hold a 1-pound free weight in each hand with your palm up. Rest your hands on your lap.
- Slowly bend your elbows and lift both hands towards your chest. When your hands are halfway up, stop lifting and hold the position for about 6 seconds.
- Now slowly lower your hands back down to your lap. Rest a bit.
- Repeat this exercise 10 times, always moving gently.

If your arm gets tired or begins to swell, take breaks. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do this exercise without resting. Try using heavier weights as you feel comfortable.
Elbow Extension, floor exercise

You can do the elbow extension exercise with both arms. You will feel muscles in your lower and upper arm working as you do the elbow extension. Gentle muscle movement should help excess lymph fluid move back into circulation and help you avoid arm swelling. Here is how to do the elbow extension exercise with small free weights. Remember: Always wear your compression sleeve on your affected arm during exercise.

 Lie down on your back, keeping your back and neck in a straight line. To help keep your lower back flat, elevate your knees. Your feet should be flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart. Do not keep your knees together—like your feet, they should be spaced apart. Use a 1-pound free weight in each hand during this exercise. Your hands should be shoulder's width apart during this exercise.

 Keep your back and neck straight and your shoulders relaxed. Hold a 1-pound free weight in each hand with your palms facing in towards each other. Raise both arms straight up above your body.

 Slowly bend your elbows and lower both hands towards your chest. When your elbows are bent at a 90-degree angle (see image), stop moving and hold the position for about six seconds.

 Now slowly raise your hands back up to position 1. Rest a bit.

 Repeat this exercise 10 times, always moving gently.

If your arms feel tired or they start to swell, take breaks. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do this exercise without stopping. Try using heavier weights as you feel comfortable.
Shoulder Horizontal Adduction

Shoulder adduction means to bring your shoulder and arm closer to the midline or center of your body, in a horizontal plane. You can do the shoulder horizontal adduction with both arms. You will feel muscles in your shoulder and arm working as you do the shoulder adduction. Gentle muscle movement should help excess lymph fluid move back into circulation and help you avoid arm swelling.

Here is how to do the shoulder horizontal adduction with small free weights. Remember: Always wear your compression sleeve on your affected arm during exercise.

- Lie down on your back, with your knees elevated. Keep your back and neck in a straight line. Your feet should be flat on the floor, with your feet and knees shoulder width apart. Use a 1-pound free weight in each hand during this exercise.
- To begin, keep your back and neck straight and your shoulders relaxed. Extend your arms away from your body, resting them on the floor. Hold a one-pound free weight in each hand with your palms facing the ceiling.
- Without bending your elbows, slowly raise both arms straight up above your body until you can bring your palms together. Hold this position for about six seconds.
- Now slowly lower your arms back up to position then rest a bit.
- Repeat this exercise 6 times, always moving gently.

When your arms feel tired or start to swell, just rest. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do this exercise without stopping. Try using heavier weights as you feel comfortable.
Shoulder Flexion—Standing Exercise

Shoulder flexion uses your deltoid (shoulder) muscles and the front of your shoulder. Holding a light free weight while doing the shoulder flexion helps put some light pressure on your axillary lymph node area and may help it drain. You can do the shoulder flexion exercise with both arms. You will feel muscles in your shoulder and arm working as you do the shoulder flexion.

Here is how to do the shoulder flexion exercise: Remember: Always wear your compression sleeve on your affected arm during exercise.

- Stand with good posture, arms at your sides. Hold a 1-pound free weight in each hand, palms toward your body.
- Slowly raise both arms, using a gentle controlled motion. When your arms are almost directly overhead, pause and hold this position for 6 counts.
- Now slowly lower your arms—do not swing but use control—until your hands are back beside your body. Rest.
- Repeat the shoulder flexion 10 times.

When your arms feel tired stop and rest. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do this exercise without stopping. Start with no weights and build up slowly using heavier weights as you feel comfortable. If the arm swells, you should stop immediately and seek the advice of your specialist.

If you cannot manage these two shoulder exercises, then try a simple shoulder roll, either sat down or stood up – slowly rotate your shoulders forward as if you are making big circles, repeat the same movement in the opposite direction.
Shoulder Abduction—Standing Exercise

Shoulder abduction means to move your shoulder and arms away from the midline or center of your body. This is the opposite of shoulder adduction, moving your arms in towards your center. Holding a light free weight while doing the shoulder abduction helps put some gentle pressure on your axillary lymph node area and may help your excess lymph fluid to drain.

You can do the shoulder abduction exercise with both arms. You will feel muscles in your shoulders and arms as well as your shoulder blade working as you do the shoulder flexion. Controlled, gentle muscle movement should help excess lymph fluid move back into circulation and help you avoid arm lymphoedema.

This exercise is also, not for everyone and you should check with your specialist before adding this one to your routine. If you are given the OK to do this, then probably best to start without weights.

Here is how to do the shoulder abduction exercise: Remember: Always wear your compression sleeve on your affected arm during exercise.

- Stand with good posture, arms at your sides. Hold a 1-pound free weight in each hand, palms facing forward.
- Slowly raise both arms out to your sides, using a gentle controlled motion. When your arms are not quite overhead, pause and hold this position for 6 counts.
- Now slowly lower your arms—do not drop your arms but use a controlled motion—until your hands are back beside your body. Rest.
- Repeat the shoulder abduction 10 times.

When your arms feel tired stop, and rest. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do this exercise without stopping. Try using heavier weights as you feel comfortable. The arm should not swell, if it does stop immediately and see your specialist physiotherapist.
Gentle post-operative exercises

Active Wrist Circumduction

Begin by placing the forearm of your wrist on the table with your wrist hanging over the edge. Close your fingers to make a loose fist and rotate your wrist in a clockwise direction. Repeat in a counterclockwise direction.

Active Hand pump

Elevate your hand up in the air, with the elbow above chest level and your hand upward. Then pump your hand by opening and closing it.

Elbow Flexion, Supination
**Active Elbow Supination**

Stand or sit up straight with your elbow tucked in by your side and your forearm perpendicular to your upper arm. Turn your palm up towards the ceiling and then down towards the floor. To progress, repeat with a weight in your hand.

**Additional Notes on Exercise with Lymphoedema**

The exercises above are typical exercises recommended for women coping with lymphoedema. That said, your physician or your physical therapist may have a different take on which exercises would be helpful for you and which ones you might want to avoid. There is currently a lot of research in progress looking for newer and better ways to manage the frustrating symptoms of lymphoedema. It should be stressed again that you should not begin these exercises until you are well healed from your breast cancer surgery and your surgeon tells you it is okay to begin exercising.

Research has been demonstrating that arm exercises can reduce swelling, but how much of an effect it has on prevention has not been well studied. We know that lymphoedema can occur any time after breast cancer surgery, with reports of people first developing these symptoms as many as 50 years after a mastectomy.

Since the science behind exercise and lymphoedema is still young, it is important to stay abreast of findings and/or changes in recommendations. As with all aspects of your care, it is important to be your own advocate in your cancer care.

Practicing these exercises can take time out of your schedule, and you may be tempted to give up. Instead of viewing this exercise as a burden—yet another leftover side effect of treatment—it might help to view this as a positive.

Studies have found that many women who survive breast cancer become healthier with regard to eating and exercise habits, and these exercises are a way of starting a healthy habit, in fact, we are learning that having cancer can change people in positive ways. Not just about lifestyle, but when it comes to compassion and an appreciation of life.
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About the Foundation

The Foundation was started in 2008, this was the 10th Anniversary of the passing of Brenda Tibbetts-Lund, who had a very courageous battle with breast cancer, even before her diagnosis, Brenda had been very active in the Cayman community promoting breast health. Having sponsored the Brenda Tibbitts Lund walk/run in her honour, Kim Lund wanted to do something special in 2008. That is when the Breast Cancer Gala Dinner idea was born, all funds raised from the Gala Dinner were to benefit breast cancer patients here in Cayman. After that gala, the realization that there was an enormous demand for funds for breast cancer patients culminated in Kim Lund and James Bovell (Owners/Brokers at RE/MAX), along with John Broadbent Cayman Islands to take the decision to found a not-for-profit charity (NPO 124) and make the Gala Dinner and Annual Event, since its inception it has become one of the most anticipated and prestigious black (pink actually) tie events on the island.

The Foundation was created originally to provide sponsorship for the Lions Club of Tropical Gardens for the Brenda Tibbitts-Lund annual walk and to provide financial support for the CI Cancer Society for the assistant they give out to breast cancer patients, this is still the case over twelve years later. The Foundation has grown to be so much more. In 2015 the Foundation launched its own Wellness Program which provides a multitude of holistic and medical services to anyone going through breast cancer. The organization also works diligently in raising Awareness and providing local practitioners with the training, skill, and medical equipment to be able to help breast cancer patients in the best way possible this along with providing mammograms where needed and a full, prosthetic/bra service for those who have undergone breast surgery.