

# Exercises after a breast reconstruction (TRAM or DIEP flap)

## Physiotherapy

Information for Patients

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### Introduction

The aim of this leaflet is to help you with exercises and tips to help with recovery after your breast reconstruction surgery. This will help you to recover at a safe and steady rate.

It is important to follow the advice that you are given, to help you to:

- prevent shoulder stiffness and to regain full movement in your shoulder. This can help you get into the required position for radiotherapy (if needed) and for imaging.
- reduce the risk of chest infections whilst less active
- encourage your circulation and healing of your scar tissue.

Your breast has been reconstructed using the muscle and tissue from your tummy (stomach)

The breast is made using an oval flap of skin, fat, muscle and blood vessels, which is moved to form a new breast. The surgery may affect how well you can move for the 1st few weeks.

It is common after this surgery to have some pain and stiffness in your shoulder and around your tummy or back.

This should improve after a short time with some simple exercises.

### Day 1: after your surgery

When you wake up from surgery, you may have:

- a drain/s, which is a thin plastic tube coming from your breast and tummy. This is designed to prevent fluid collection and reduce swelling. This will be removed usually in 3 to 5 days.
- a drip in your arm to give you pain medication.

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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- an oxygen mask on your face to make sure you are breathing in a high level of oxygen which helps with your healing.
- a catheter in your bladder to collect your pee (urine), so that you do not have to walk to the toilet until you are feeling better.

If you are feeling well enough, your physiotherapist will ask you to:

- get out of bed and into the chair, helped by the nursing staff or physiotherapists.
- increase how far you are walking over the next few days.

There are 3 main areas that the physiotherapist will talk you through:

1. your chest and breathing
2. your circulation
3. your shoulder

## Breathing exercises

After surgery it is normal for your breathing to be shallow. Deep breathing exercises can help to open your airways and clear any fluid that might build up.

### Repeat 3 times every 2 hours

- Take 3 slow, deep breaths, trying to fill all of your lungs
- Feel your bottom ribs and chest expand
- Hold for 3 to 5 seconds
- Breathe out through your mouth - follow this with a huff and cough:
- Do a huff by forcing your breath out quickly
- Finish with a strong cough. Rest and then repeat the cycle

## Circulation exercises

- Try to start gentle leg exercises to encourage good circulation. You can do this in the chair or in the bed
- Tap your toes by moving your ankles up and down
- Bend and straighten your knees 1 at a time
- Aim to do 10 repetitions of each exercise every 1 to 2 hours until you are more active again.



## Getting out of bed

If you are feeling well enough, you may get out of bed and into the chair with the help of the nursing staff or physiotherapist. Your physiotherapist will advise you to do more walking as pain allows over the next few days.

The roll technique is the most comfortable way to get in and out of bed.



1. Gently roll onto your side, bending your knees to assist you.



2. Bring your feet to the edge and lower your legs off the side



3. Using your unaffected arm, push yourself up into a seated position.

4) When getting up from the bed, push up using both of your arms to help.

Getting back into bed should be done in reverse, as this is the most comfortable for your tummy.

When you are standing and walking, you may feel tightness in your tummy. This will cause you to stoop and it is normal. This tightness will gradually ease and within 6 weeks you should be able to stand upright.

## Shoulder exercises

### Day 1 to 3

You should start to move your shoulder with some gentle exercises to prevent stiffness.

**Repeat each exercise 5 to 10 times, 3 times a day. These exercises should be comfortable and not painful.**



1. Gently shrug your shoulders up towards your ears and then relax.



2. Link your hands together and gently bring your hands forwards to shoulder height.

**Do not lift your arms above 90 degrees**



3. Lift your arm out to the side up to shoulder height.

**Do not lift your arms above 90 degrees.**



4. Take your hand to the back of your head, then to the base of your back on the same side.

Remember to take your time with these exercises. If you are having any problems, ask a member of the nursing team to contact the physiotherapists.

## Shoulder exercises

### Day 4 onwards

You are likely to be back on your feet and gently walking to the bathroom and around your room. You can now start doing your shoulder exercises as long as they are comfortable. It is now safe to take your arm above shoulder height.

**Remember it is important to listen to your body. Do not overdo** the exercises.

If you feel pain or tiredness take a break. It is normal to feel a gentle stretch with these exercises.

**Repeat these exercises 5 to 10 times, 3 times a day.**



1. Slide your hand up the wall forwards as far as you feel comfortable to.

2. Slide your hand up the wall to the side as far as you feel comfortable.

## Exercises for your tummy muscles

After this surgery, your stomach muscles will not be as strong as they were before and will need time to heal. But, some gentle exercises can help to reduce pain and improve the movement in your back. Only do these exercises if you have been advised that they are **okay** to start. You must stop if they are painful.



1. In a lying position with your knees bent, try to flatten the small of your back into the bed and then arch your back. Do this slowly and carefully.

2. In the same position you can also carefully take your knees side to side so that your lower back turns a little.

**Hold for 5 seconds. Repeat 5 to 10 times, 3 times daily.**

## Getting back to normal daily tasks

### When should it start?

Every breast reconstruction procedure is unique. No 2 women who have it have the same expectations or way of life. You need to follow the advice that your doctor will give you in your follow-up appointments.

In the early stages of healing, it is important to wear the right bra. This will help your breast to heal fully. Nursing staff, who are trained and experienced in this area, will be able to guide you.

The following tips will give you basic clues as to whether or not it is safe to get back to normal daily tasks.

This depends on a few factors: your surgery, outcome, healing, and the medical advice your surgeon, nursing staff and therapists have given you.

- Heavy housework \_\_\_\_\_ weeks
- Driving (check with insurance) \_\_\_\_\_ weeks
- Return to work \_\_\_\_\_ weeks
- Return to sport \_\_\_\_\_ weeks

### Physiotherapy follow-up

You should receive an outpatient appointment to see a physiotherapist.

This is to :

- check that your movement and function are getting back to normal after your surgery
- see if you need any further advice to help you with your recovery.

If you cannot attend, please change the appointment. To do this, call the

**Physiotherapy Department, University Hospital Leicester (UHL): 0116 2585816**

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