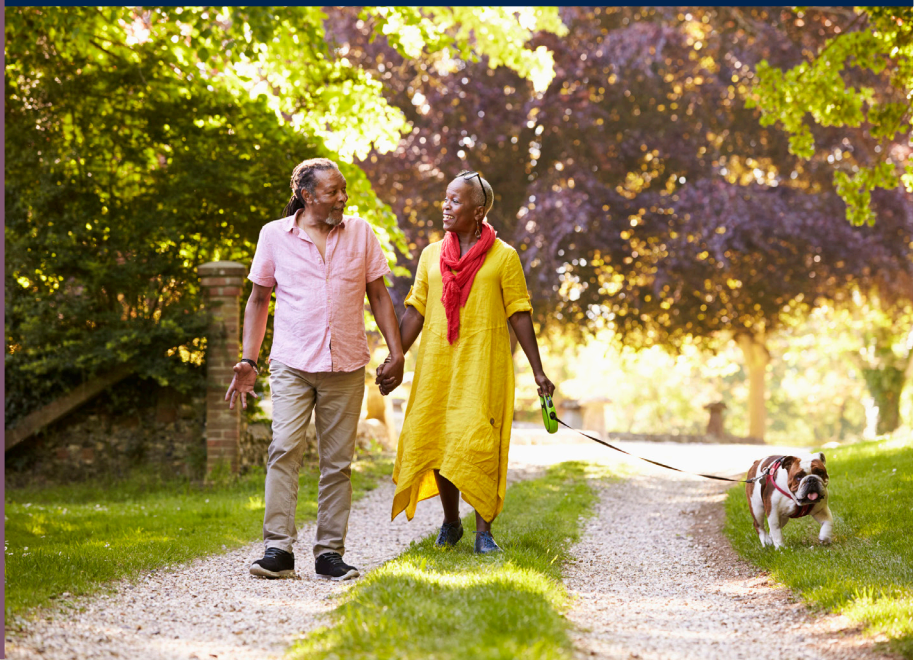
Information for
patients & families

Exercise and movement during breast cancer treatment



Symptom Management

Cancer Care Alberta

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The information is to be updated every 3 years, or as new clinical evidence emerges.
If there are any concerns or updates with this information, please email cancer.patiented@cancercarealberta.ca.

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Introduction

This book is for breast cancer patients who will have surgery and/or radiation treatment.

If you will have radiation treatment, you can access the eLearning about 'Stretches and exercises to get ready for breast radiation treatment.' Scan the QR code or visit bit.ly/cca_radiation



This booklet will:

- Show stretches and exercises to help your shoulder and chest muscles move and stay flexible.
- Explain common problems that can happen after breast cancer treatment.
- Explain why staying active is good for your health.
- Give tips to help you heal and recover smoothly.
- Help you notice, understand and lower your chance of developing arm problems after breast surgery or radiation.



While doing the stretches and exercises in this book, tell your healthcare team if you notice:

- Increased or worsening pain.
- A decrease in your range of motion.

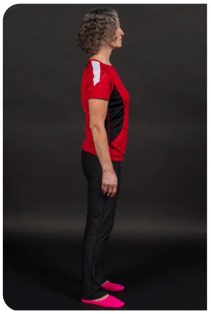
Good posture

Why is good posture important?

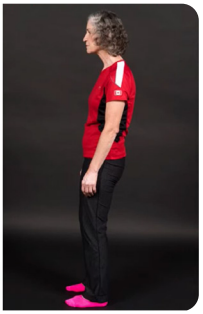
After surgery or radiation therapy, the muscles in the front of your chest (pectoralis muscle) can get tight.

This often happens because you protect the area getting treatment by holding your arm or shoulder forward with a rounded back.

If you keep this rounded posture, it can lead to pain and stiffness in the shoulder and spine.



Good posture



Poor posture

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What can I do to correct my posture?

1. Check your posture in the mirror:
   - Stand tall from the low back to your neck and head.
   - Make sure you ear lines up with the tip of your shoulder and the front of your chest is lifted.
2. Do posture correction exercises, such as:
   - Squeeze your shoulder blades together.
   - Hold for 5 seconds, then relax.
   - Repeat 5 to 10 times, a few times through the day.
3. Pay attention and correct your posture throughout the day when you sit and when you stand.



Shoulder stretches before, during and after surgery and/or radiation

Stretching and movement exercises can help keep your joints and muscles moving easily. They can help reduce breast discomfort or pain.

Surgery and radiation for breast cancer can make the soft tissue in the chest, armpit and front of your shoulder tight and stiff.

These changes can happen at any time within **6 months after radiation treatment ends,** so it is important to stretch daily, even if you do not feel stiff or tight.

You may choose to keep doing these exercises longer as a warm-up to help your chest, armpit and shoulder stay loose and flexible.

Be gentle with yourself

Everyone has different amounts of movement, strength and flexibility. It's important to start where you are at.

Do not stretch to the point of pain.

How to do stretches safely:

1. Start with a warm-up.
2. Stretch until you feel a gentle pull in your chest, armpit or the front of your shoulder. **Stop if you feel any pain.**
3. Hold each stretch for **10 seconds**. Repeat each stretch **5 to 10 times**.
4. Do your stretches **once a day to help keep your movement**. Do them **twice a day if you need to improve your movement**, or if you are starting to lose movement.

If your shoulder movement does not improve or gets worse with regular stretching, you will need to be assessed by a healthcare provider.

Warm-up

Sit or stand up straight.

Keep good posture—pull your shoulders back, keep them level and line them up with your ears.

1. Place your fingertips on your shoulders.
2. Make circles by lifting your shoulders up, back, down and forward. Do 10 forward circles followed by 10 backward circles.



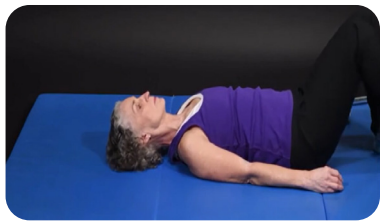
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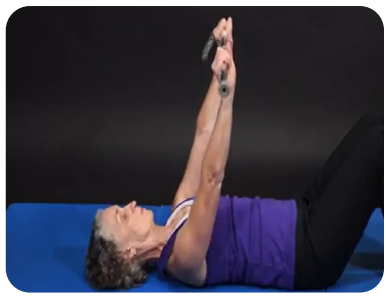
Overhead stretch

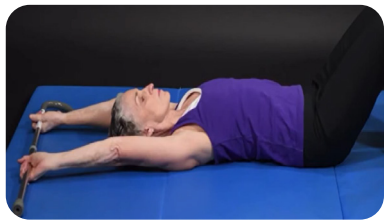
Lie on your back with your knees bent.

1. Hold a stick with your hands shoulder-width apart. With your elbows straight, lift your arms up overhead and hold.
2. Slowly lower your hands to the floor above your head.
3. Slowly raise your arms back up from the floor.
4. Repeat 5 times.

Repeat the same movement with a wide grip of the stick (arms are in a V shape). Repeat 5 times.







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Butterfly stretch

Lie on your back with your knees slightly bent and your hands clasped behind your head.

1. Slowly lower your elbows down towards the bed or the floor and hold.
2. Slowly raise your elbows back.




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Snow angel stretch

Lie on your back with your knees bent.

1. Face your palms towards the ceiling with fingers touching the bed or floor.
2. Slide both arms out to the side and hold for 10 seconds where you feel the most stretch.
3. Continue moving your arms fully overhead and then return to the start position.

Stop if you feel any pain.




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Trunk side bend in butterfly

Sit or stand with good posture and clasp hands behind the head.

1. Bend your body to the right and hold for 10 seconds. Return to the starting position.
2. Slowly bend to the left and hold for 10 seconds. Return to the starting position.



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Standing child's pose

Stand with your hands on a counter or holding on to the back of a sturdy chair.

1. Walk away from the counter, lowering your body by bending your hips.
2. Keep your back straight.

You should feel a stretch in front of your shoulders and along the trunk (or torso).



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Child's pose stretch (optional)

Only do this stretch if you can safely get into and out of this position.

Kneel on the floor or a bed.



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1. Slowly take a deep breath in.
2. Sit back towards your heels and reach out with your arms.
3. Let your head and your heart sink towards the floor.

Rotation stretch (optional)

This stretch may help if it is hard for you to reach behind your back.

Hold a towel behind your back with 1 hand holding each end.





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1. Reach 1 arm up behind your neck and the other arm down behind your back.
2. Gently slide the towel across your back and hold for **10 seconds**.
3. Then pull the towel down your back and hold again.
4. Repeat **3 times**, then switch arms.

Exercise and breast cancer

Why should I exercise?

Exercise is good for your body in many ways. It helps your body work better, gives you more energy and improves how you feel. There is strong evidence that exercise can help people with breast cancer **live longer.**

What should I do for exercise?

Any amount of exercise or physical activity is helpful. Pick an activity that you enjoy and do it regularly.

How do I begin?

For best results from exercise:

- **Start slowly** at an easy pace for a short time. Start with 5 to 10 minutes throughout the day.
- **Gradually increase** how long and how fast you exercise.
- Build up to 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week. You can break this into **20 to 30 minutes a day.**
- Do strength training exercises that work large muscle groups 2 times a week

Get more information in the Cancer and exercise leaflet at your cancer centre or visit bit.ly/ccaExercise


Cancer & Exercise

How hard should I work?

Use the talk test. Walk at a pace where you feel your heart beating more quickly, but that still allows you to hold a conversation. If you're too out of breath to talk, slow down.

How long should I keep exercising?

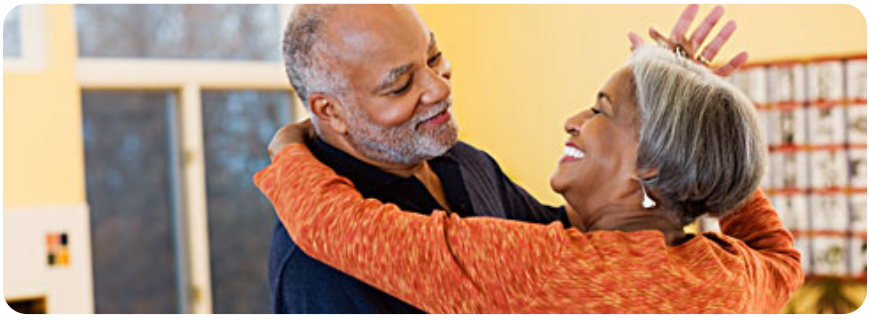
Exercise can be something you do for life. Stop exercising if you feel pain or feel very short of breath.

As you get older, you may need to change how you exercise. Activities like **biking, swimming and walking** are gentle on your joints, and you can often do them for longer periods of time.

Community-based exercise programs

Try a community-based cancer exercise program to help you increase your activity and exercise:

- Alberta Cancer Exercise Program (ACE) for Calgary, Edmonton, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Red Deer. Visit bit.ly/albertacancerexercise
- EXercise for Cancer to Enhance Living Well (EXCEL) for rural and remote sites across Alberta. Visit bit.ly/albertaexcel
- Wellspring Alberta. Visit wellspring.ca/alberta/
- Yoga Thrive. Visit bit.ly/YogaThrive
- City recreation centres, YMCA
- Community centres and halls
- Seniors' groups
- Fitness gyms, yoga studios, martial arts studios, etc.



Possible side effects from treatment

Cancer-related fatigue

What is cancer-related fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue means feeling very tired or low on energy. Many people with cancer feel this at some point. You may notice it during daily tasks, like taking a shower or brushing your teeth. Resting or sleeping more usually does not make this type of fatigue better.

For more information, read the Managing cancer-related fatigue booklet at your cancer centre or visit bit.ly/cancerfatiguebook



What causes cancer-related fatigue?

Cancer-related fatigue is complex. Many things can cause or worsen this feeling. Changes in your body from cancer and its treatments, such as radiation therapy and chemotherapy, often play a big role in how tired you feel.

What can I do about fatigue?

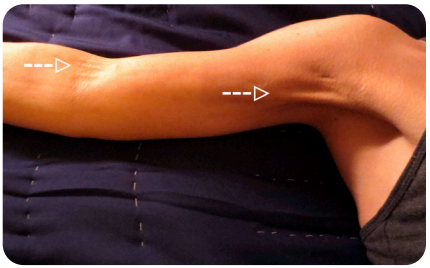
1. Physical activity, like walking at a pace that increases your heart rate, can improve your energy levels.
2. Plan your day so you save your energy for the things you need or want to do.
3. Talk with your doctor to make sure there are no medical causes for your fatigue.

Axillary web syndrome (cording)

What is axillary web syndrome?

Axillary web syndrome can feel like a tight cord running down from your armpit to your arm or wrist, or across your chest wall. You may also see a cord-like line under your skin.

These bands can make it hard to reach over your head, lift your arm or straighten your elbow. There might be pain in the cord when you move your arm.



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Axillary web syndrome can start **right after surgery or up to about 12 weeks later**. In most people, it **goes away on its own over time.**

What causes axillary web syndrome?
The exact cause of axillary web syndrome is not known. It might happen when lymph or small blood vessels become irritated after surgery or radiation treatment.

What can I do about axillary web syndrome?

Daily shoulder stretching may help to prevent axillary web syndrome.

If you develop axillary web syndrome, keep doing your daily stretching but hold the stretch longer. Work up to longer holds of 15 to 30 seconds. Do 5 to 10 repetitions, 2 times a day.

Learn more in the Axillary web syndrome handout or visit bit.ly/axillaryweb


Axillary web syndrome (cording)

If your symptoms do not improve, see a physiotherapist.

Lymphedema

What is lymphedema?

The lymphatic system is part of the circulatory and immune systems. When the lymphatic system cannot move lymph fluid out of your tissues, fluid builds up in the tissues, causing **swelling.** This swelling is called **lymphedema**.

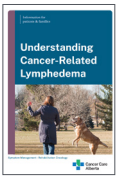
Lymphedema and breast cancer

In people with breast cancer, lymphedema can affect the **arm, hand, remaining breast or chest area** on the side of the body that had treatment.

Lymphedema can develop when the lymph system gets damaged. Cancer, surgery, radiation, blockage, infection or injury can cause this damage.

About **1 to 20 out of 100 people** who have breast surgery or radiation therapy develop lymphedema. The risk depends on the type of surgery or radiation given. Lymphedema can start **soon after surgery,** or it may appear **months or even years later.**

For more information, read the Understanding cancer-related lymphedema booklet at your cancer centre or visit bit.ly/cca_lymphedema



What are my risks of getting lymphedema?

Your chance of developing lymphedema increases if you have lymph nodes removed. If you had a:

- Sentinel node dissection—your chance is 4 to 10%
- Axillary node dissection—your chance is 25 to 30%

Other risk factors include:

- Being overweight, or having a body mass index (BMI) over 25
- Getting radiation therapy to your lymph nodes
- Having a fluid-filled sac (called a seroma), infection or axillary web syndrome after breast surgery
- Being Black or Hispanic

How can I reduce my chance of developing lymphedema?

Protect yourself from infection:

- Take care of the skin on your arm and hand.
- Keep your skin clean and use moisturizer often.
- Wear protective clothing when needed, such as gloves when gardening.
- Protect yourself from insect bites.
- Clean cuts, scratches or scrapes right away with soap and water. Apply antibiotic ointment and cover with a bandage. Watch for signs of infection (**page 18**).

Increase movement:

- Start exercising slowly and build up over time. This slow approach works best.
- Stay strong by doing strength training and moderate-intensity exercise.
- Work toward getting your arm back to normal strength.

- When you have a big task to do, break it into smaller, easier steps.
- Don't push through pain. Take short breaks when needed.

Keep yourself cool — heat may trigger swelling:

- Limit hot tubs, steam rooms and saunas for the first **1 to 2 years after treatment.**
- **Think about your own risk factors** and what is safest for you.

Maintain a healthy weight:

Extra fat tissue increases the strain placed on the lymphatic system. Try to:

- **Exercise regularly** to help you maintain a healthy body weight. Try following the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines.
- Follow **Canada's Food Guide** to choose healthy foods each day. You can **see a registered dietitian** for personal nutrition advice and support.

If you need more help, speak to your doctor about weight management.

How can I tell if I have lymphedema?

You might notice lymphedema in different ways:

- **Feel it:** Your arm may feel heavy or full.
- **See it:** Your arm, hand or remaining breast area may look larger. The skin may leave a dent when you press on it.
- **Notice it:** Clothes, sleeves or jewellery may feel tighter on the side you had cancer than on the other side.

How do I know if I have an infection?

See a doctor right away if you notice any of these symptoms in your arm, hand, breast or chest area:

- Your skin feels warm or your arm feels hot to the touch.
- You see redness, red lines or a rash.
- Swelling starts suddenly or gets worse quickly.
- Swelling and throbbing in the arm.
- You feel pain or tenderness in the area.



Infection can progress quickly. If you feel flu-like symptoms, fever or chills, general aching or weakness, go to your local emergency department.

Why do I need to worry about infection?

Infections can start or make lymphedema worse. The lymph system has 2 main jobs.

1. It collects fluid (called lymph) from the tissues and returns it to the blood.
2. It cleans this fluid in the lymph nodes.

When the lymph system does not work well, fluid can build up in the arm. If germs are present, this collected fluid can make it easier for an infection to grow.

What can be done about lymphedema?

Damage to the lymph system cannot be fixed. However, you can **reduce and control lymphedema.**

If you notice any signs of lymphedema, contact a doctor right away and ask for a referral to a physiotherapist or occupational therapist trained in lymphedema. They will work with you to create a treatment plan that meets your needs.

Lymphedema is easier to manage when you treat it early, so get help as soon as symptoms appear.

How can I get more help?

Resources and supports can be found in your community and in your cancer centre.

Adult Community Rehabilitation
If you are looking for community adult rehabilitation services, you can search on this website:

albertahealthservices.ca/rehab/Page15329.aspx

- Select ‘Rehabilitation Advice Line’

Cancer Care Alberta rehabilitation oncology
Cancer rehabilitation services available at various Cancer Care Alberta sites can benefit all people with cancer who experience a change in quality of life after diagnosis, including all types and stages of cancer.

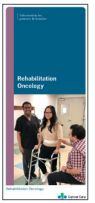
Cancer rehabilitation involves many types of healthcare specialists working together to develop a personal plan that considers your preferences, strengths and goals.

How do I contact rehabilitation oncology in the cancer centre?

Contact your local cancer centre or search “rehabilitation oncology” online on the Alberta Referral Directory.

You can also learn more in the linked resources:

For more information, check out the Rehabilitation oncology leaflet or visit bit.ly/rehabilitation_oncology



Important things to remember:



Do your stretches and exercises before, during and after surgery and/or radiation for at least 6 months.



Start exercise slowly. Build up to 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise per week.



If you need help, contact the rehabilitation oncology department.

For other Cancer Care Alberta resources, visit
cancercarealberta.ca

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