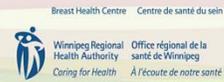


# Lymphedema & Exercises after surgery

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Certified Lymphedema Therapist  
WRHA Breast Health Centre



Hi, my name is Jen Dalke and I work as a Certified Lymphedema Therapist at the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority Breast Health Centre. I am one of two therapists that manage Lymphedema at the Centre.

# WRHA Breast Health Centre

Certified Lymphedema Therapists

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Toll-free in Manitoba: 1-888-501-5219



This section of the program is on Lymphedema. Lymphedema is a condition that can occur when the normal lymph flow becomes impaired and lymph fluid starts to accumulate. It is a **chronic** condition that can happen to your body after you have had breast surgery. It is impossible to know for sure who will and won't develop lymphedema, but it is a condition that can be managed with proper care and maintenance.

Studies have shown that patients who undergo surgery with lymph node dissections tend to have a higher risk of developing lymphedema. Let me explain. Your normal lymph flow can become impaired after the removal of your lymph nodes, after radiation, or with trauma or injury to the lymph vessels.

As a lymphedema therapist it is my job to stimulate your lymphatic system and help your body move excess fluid from the affected area.

## Signs and symptoms

- Swelling
- Heaviness
- Aching or fullness
- Tightness (clothes and jewelry)

Signs and symptoms of lymphedema include; swelling or edema on the surgery side. The areas that could be affected are your arm and/or hand, your chest, armpit and trunk. Patients with lymphedema feel heaviness, tightness, aching or fullness in the affected area. Your clothing and/or jewelry will feel tighter. The tightness of your clothing and jewelry may be a good determinant of increased swelling. Pay attention to these changes, and seek medical advice if you feel any changes.

I am now going to demonstrate some stretching exercises you can do after you have had your surgery.

It is important to start doing stretches and exercises immediately after surgery to encourage mobility, reduce pain, stiffness and improve your overall well-being. The exercises that are demonstrated in this presentation are gentle and should be done in the first week after surgery. While performing the exercises, make sure that you take deep breaths and the movements are slow and controlled. It is normal to feel a gentle tissue stretch or slight pull of the skin

# Shoulder shrugs



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First one that will be performed is shoulder shrugs. Shoulder shrugs can be done sitting or standing. Start with your shoulders in a relaxed position and slowly lift them towards your ears. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds, then slowly lower your shoulders and relax. You can repeat this exercise 5 to 10 times.

# Shoulder rotations



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Next exercise is shoulder rotations, this one helps to increase circulation in your shoulders and promote good posture. Start by slowly rotating your shoulders upwards, backwards, downwards and then relax in the position you started in. Repeat 5 to 10 times then switch directions, moving your shoulders in the opposite direction. Forward shoulder circles begin with your shoulders moving upwards, forwards, downwards, then relaxing in the position you started with. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

## Contract shoulder blades



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A great way to improve your posture is to do this next activity, by simply squeezing your shoulder blades together. This movement stretches and opens up your chest area. To properly contract your shoulder blades together, keep your shoulders down (in a relaxed position) with your elbows straight/extended and palms facing your sides. You may want to try this in front of a mirror so you can make sure that you have proper position. Contract your scapula together and rotate your palms so they face forward, this motion will naturally bring your shoulders in an external rotation. Hold this movement for 5-10 seconds then relax. Repeat 5-10 times.

## Arm lifts



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Arm lifts can be done sitting or standing. Hold your hands together in front of you with your elbows bent, in a relaxed position to start. Slowly lift your arms upwards until you feel a gentle stretch, if you have any pain or tenderness, lower your arms until you can comfortably perform the exercise. Hold for 1 to 2 seconds and slowly lower your arms until you're in the starting position. Same as the other exercises, repeat 5 to 10 times.

## Squeezing a ball



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One of the best things you can buy is a small, soft squishy ball. By squeezing this ball it may help reduce swelling and improve circulation by encouraging the pumping action by the muscles, not to mention act as a stress reliever. If you are sitting or laying down relaxing, squeeze the small ball several times. As easy as that.

## In the early stages of healing

- Try not to lift more than 10 lbs
- Avoid vigorous, repetitive movements
- Avoid reaching high on your surgery side
- Prop arm with pillows

These exercises should be done within your pain tolerance, and remember to take deep breaths while doing them. In the early stage of healing it is recommended to not lift anything heavier than 10 lbs, avoid activities that require you to perform vigorous (repetitive) motions (like vacuuming, shoveling snow) or reaching high on your surgery side. Take it easy and prop your arm with pillows for comfort and to allow yourself to heal.

## Wall walking forwards



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The next set of exercises demonstrated, encourage full range of motion in your shoulders. It is important to start these stretches as soon as possible after surgery to prevent possible issues with mobility in your shoulder on your surgery side. If you have had a drain inserted, wait until the drain has been removed to begin these stretches.

I'd like to start with wall walking. It is a gentle exercise to increase the mobility in your shoulder. Stand facing the wall at about an arms length from the wall. With your elbows straight, start from your hips, slowly walking your fingers up the wall as high as you can. Make sure you are not just bending your elbows but that the movement is coming from the shoulders. Walking both hands will help to maintain good posture.

Hold for 5 deep breaths and then take one more deep breath and try to walk your fingers a little further up the wall. Then slowly walk both arms down. Relax and repeat several times. Do not be discouraged if your progress is slow. One finger at a time is progress.

## Wall walking sideways



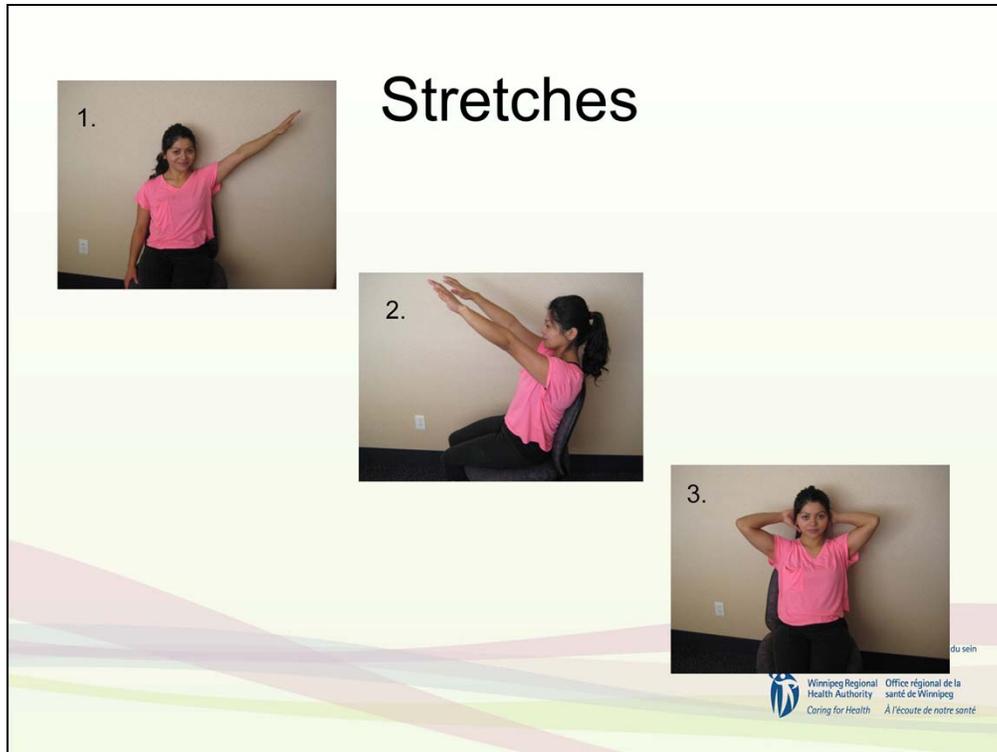
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Next we will perform wall walking in a different direction, to our side. Stand sideways with your shoulder facing the wall. Starting from your hip slowly walk your fingers up the wall as high as you can. Remember to try to keep your elbow straight. If you feel pain then slightly lower your arm until the stretch is not painful. Hold for 5 deep breaths, then take one more breath and try to walk your fingers a little further up the wall. Then slowly walk your fingers down the wall. Relax and repeat several times. If you are having trouble with your mobility, try repeating these exercises 2 to 3 times with several repetitions throughout the day.



The next 3 movements could be done seated or standing, they are similar to the wall walking movements.

1. Start by raising your surgery side arm out to the side as high as possible. Keep your elbow straight. Hold for the count of 10 and then lower slowly. You can repeat this exercise several times. Remember to take deep breaths while performing this stretch.

2. The next movement, is similar to the previous one. You will slowly raise your arm forward as high as possible, keeping your elbow straight. Hold for the count of 10 and then lower slowly. You can repeat this exercise several times.

3. This next movement will provide a stretch in your pectoralis muscles. These muscles are located in your chest area and can feel tight after breast cancer surgery. To do this stretch you should be able to comfortably place both hands behind your neck. Begin with both elbows pointing forwards. Slowly move your elbows out to the sides as far as possible, if you are standing against a wall, try to touch your elbows to the wall behind you. Hold for the count of 10. Return your elbows to pointing forwards and then relax.

## Back scratch stretch



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The last stretch I'd like to include I call the "back scratch stretch". This stretch is to help you with the motion of scratching your back, or doing up your bra.

For this stretch, you can use a towel to assist the movement and increase the stretch. To do this stretch you should have fairly good mobility in your shoulders. Start by holding one end of the towel in the hand of the side you want to stretch. Start by holding the towel up in your surgery hand. Grab the bottom end of the towel with your non-surgery hand. Gently pull the arm down your back by pulling on the towel with your hand that is below. The motion should appear as though you are trying to "dry your back". Take deep breaths while holding the stretch, after holding the stretch for a minimum of 30 seconds, try to increase your range by gently pulling the towel further down your back (slow and controlled).

## Back scratch stretch



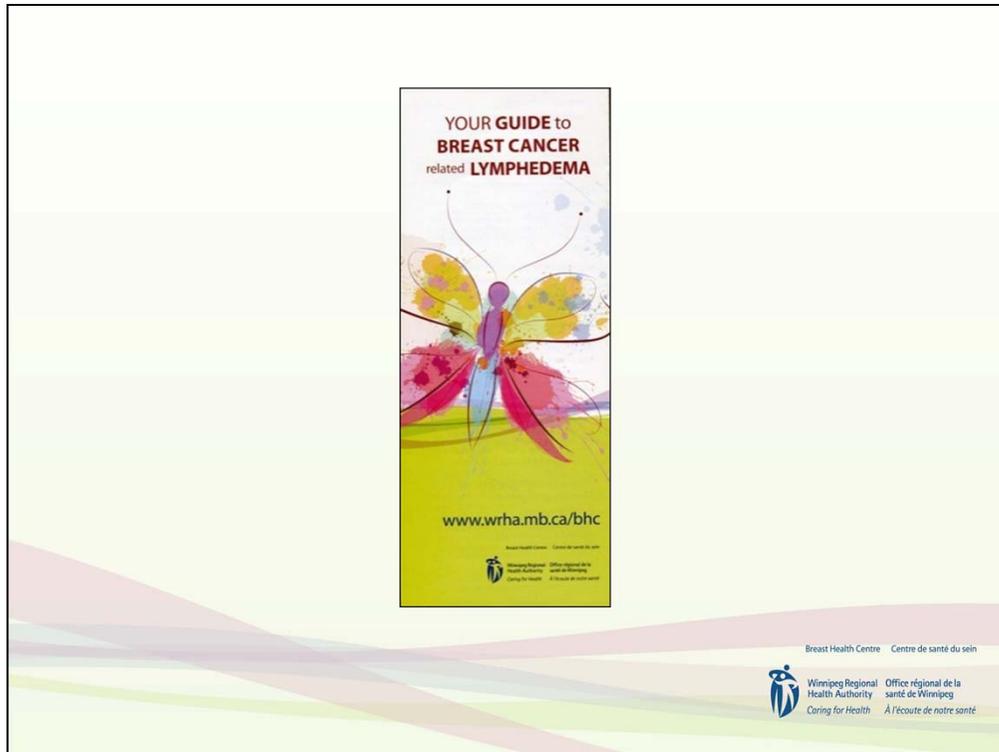
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Change the hand positions and gently pull your arm up your back. If this motion is challenging, you may want to start by placing your hand on your hip and slowly moving it up towards your midback. If you want to use a towel or need to increase the stretch, gently pull on the towel with your hand that is above your head. Repeat this stretch 2-3 times per day as needed.

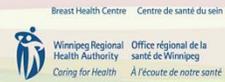
You should continue the exercises until you have regained full movement in your shoulder. If you are having trouble with mobility on your surgery side, contact your nurse/doctor who may refer you to one of the Breast Health Centre lymphedema therapists or a physiotherapist.



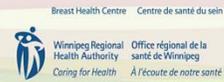
I encourage you to attend our post op session or view the post op DVD or online link as I go into detail about lymphedema and our program at the Breast Health Centre.

Instructions for the stretches demonstrated along with our pamphlet 'Your Guide to Breast Cancer related Lymphedema' are available online at [wrha.mb.ca/bhc](http://wrha.mb.ca/bhc) in the Client Education and Resource section

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If you would like to find out more information about our lymphedema program you may contact a certified lymphedema therapist at the Breast Health Centre 204-235-3684 or 204-237-2034 or call toll-free in Manitoba 1-888-501-5219.