



## The Road to Recovery after Breast Cancer Surgery

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Unfortunately, many women devote so much time, energy and courage to simply getting through breast cancer surgery that they often neglect their recovery plan. A proper recovery plan requires attention to psychological, mental, and physical healing. If women are able to regain control of their physical recovery, it will indirectly affect the other components in the recovery plan.

In addition to lymphedema, various other physical problems may arise after breast cancer surgery. These problems will vary depending upon the woman, the specific type of surgery and the reconstruction efforts. Through the aide of a specially trained physical therapist, women should be able to recognize, treat and control these different physical problems and allow them to take control of their physical recovery.

### **What specific problems would benefit from physical therapy intervention?**

Some problems may include, but are not limited to, lymphedema, pain, decreased flexibility and strength of the arm (or other areas), and decreased soft tissue mobility due to scar tissue.

### **What causes pain and how can a physical therapist help me?**

The incision site itself may certainly cause a great deal of pain. Scar tissue can adhere to nerve cells causing a variety of sensations including pain. A physical therapist can address the scar and the tight tissue surrounding the incision through manual techniques such as scar and soft tissue mobilization. Scar mobilization techniques can also be taught to the patient.

Muscle guarding and spasm is a normal response to any injury including surgery. This guarding is not only painful but can lead to a particularly debilitating “frozen shoulder.” Specific exercises can help stretch this tissue and prevent further tightening of the affected arm.

### **Should I wait until all my treatments are completed before seeking physical therapy?**

Not necessarily. This would certainly need to be discussed with your physician first, but physical therapy can be beneficial both before and during certain treatments. During radiation therapy, a patient must lie very still with her arm extended overhead. This position can be very uncomfortable if arm tightness or pain persist after breast surgery. Addressing the tightness and pain through specific exercises and modalities can make radiation treatments more comfortable for patients.

Some women choose reconstruction with an implanted prosthesis. In this case, an expander is placed and is periodically filled with saline to stretch the muscle and skin. In some cases, the pectoralis muscle will respond by involuntary contractions or spasms. These spasms can be controlled through both manual stretching and exercises called isometric contractions.

### **How do I get referred to physical therapy?**

Ask one of your doctors to refer you to physical therapy. It is important for your physical therapist to maintain communication with your physicians during your physical therapy treatments.

### **What should I expect at physical therapy?**

At your initial evaluation with the physical therapist it is important for her to know what type of surgical procedure was performed (simple mastectomy, modified mastectomy, etc.), if any cosmetic procedures were done at the time of surgery (breast reconstruction, implants, or expanders), and if you are having any concurrent chemotherapy or radiation therapy. The therapist will also assess the range of motion of your arms and neck, strength of your arms and trunk, and evaluate your posture. Soft tissue mobility of your scars and surrounding tissue should also be assessed.

After evaluating your strengths and weaknesses, your therapist will design an individualized treatment plan. The ultimate goal is to become independent with a complete home exercise program designed to address your specific needs.

Leslie Clark is a physical therapist at Physical Therapy for Women, Inc. *At **Physical Therapy for Women, Inc.**, pts receive therapy by a licensed Physical Therapist who specializes in Women's Health. Therapy sessions are private, one-hour sessions with direct hands on treatment by the therapist. Patients need to be referred by their physician to receive these services. Most insurances are accepted, and services are reimbursed as for any other PT diagnosis. Physical Therapy for Women, Inc. is located on Oleander Drive in Wilmington, NC. PTFW can be reached by calling (910)798-2318. If you have any questions regarding our services, or would be interested in scheduling a luncheon at your office, please do not hesitate to contact us. We welcome your interest and thank you for your support.*