

Role of Physiotherapy after mastectomy

Dr. Chithrah Saranathan

Physiotherapist, KPH

For persons undergoing any breast cancer surgery, post-operative physiotherapy can speed recovery, and assist them in returning to normal activities of daily living.

Patients who have undergone mastectomy frequently experience: limited upper limb range of motion (ROM) and weakness, chest pain, and scarring at the incision site. Additional difficulties may include: lymphotoedema (swelling of the upper limb), scapular (Shoulder blade) winging – which may result from injury to the muscles that stabilize the scapula, and postural changes and balance impairments due to loss of breast weight. The degree of difficulty patients encounter with any of these complications varies with the extent of the disease, surgical procedure, age and co-existing problems. Naturally, the time frame for recovery after surgery is dependent on these factors.

Early physiotherapy intervention is considered essential to an efficient recovery. Ideally, patients are referred to physiotherapy immediately after surgery. After a thorough evaluation is completed, a treatment plan is designed to meet individual needs and goals.

Physiotherapy may include: Instruction in proper posture; Active, passive and auto-assistive ROM exercises (See illustrations below); strengthening exercises, Massage with bandaging, Compression or supportive garments, scar mobilization, pain relief modalities, abdominal exercise for patients who have undergone reconstructive surgery, design of a home exercise program, and education about lymphotoedema and its minimisation (skin care, the avoidance of strain, improving the skin's elasticity). Additional physiotherapy interventions may include trigger point release, myofascial release, soft tissue mobilization and relaxation techniques. Often the patient will require guidance as to the appropriate levels of activities if they are undergoing chemotherapy or radiation therapy after mastectomy.

Numerous research have demonstrated the benefits of exercise post mastectomy - a systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by McNeely et al (2006) indicated that exercise is an effective intervention to improve quality of life, cardiorespiratory fitness, physical functioning and fatigue in breast cancer patients and survivors. Additionally, evidence also shows that exercise can reduce breast cancer risk. The American Cancer Society (2010) recommends engaging in 45-60 minutes of physical exercise at least 5 days per week.

In summary, physiotherapy serves to regain normal use of the affected limb after mastectomy. Since prevention is the key to recovery, patients who have undergone mastectomy are encouraged to begin treatment as soon as possible.

Auto-assisted shoulder flexion with pole & weights



Wall climbing exercise- Shoulder abduction

