

## Success After Surgery

By Sharon Leslie, PT, DPT

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Through the whirlwind of a cancer diagnosis and the myriad of decisions that one has to make leading up to surgery for breast cancer, often people are not prepared for the aftermath of surgery. Post-op instructions can be a blur and the reality of managing the weeks after surgery can seem overwhelming and scary. Fortunately, it doesn't need to be that way.

### Setting Your Body Up for Success

There are several things you can do immediately postoperatively to promote the best outcomes and to avoid complications. The first is very simple—rest! Your body needs to heal. It doesn't care if your floors need to be cleaned, the dog needs to be walked, or the garden needs weeding. We know that if you invest the time right after surgery to take care of your body, you are more likely to have a smoother recovery. So, what does that mean during the first two weeks after surgery?

- Avoid cooking or household chores.
- Avoid working and decrease computer activity.
- Have someone else walk the dog and take care of pets.
- Avoid exercise for cardiovascular conditioning or weight loss—don't do too much, too soon.
- Adhere to the arm movement restrictions given to you by your medical team.

While it is important to keep your arms relaxed and mobile, your medical team will likely tell you to avoid excessive use

of your arms and to avoid raising your arm on the surgical side above shoulder height. Some doctors recommend these movement restrictions while your drains are still in, plus three more days in order to avoid increased swelling or seroma formation (a pocket of fluid near the surgery site). For lumpectomy patients who may not have a drain, these movement restrictions might still be necessary for several days—ask your doctor how long you should adhere to them. If you had surgery on one side, you can freely use the other arm for activities of daily living.

### Exercise

Light walking around your house is important, but if you feel lightheaded or dizzy do not attempt to walk independently. We are lucky to live in California, where the weather allows us to walk outside much of the year. It is okay to take short, flat walks and increase gradually in distance and speed as you get further from surgery. Start slow and don't push yourself—recovery is a marathon, not a sprint! Do not resume your regular exercise routine or attempt to walk for long distances until you are cleared by your physician.

### Posture and Positioning

While your movement is restricted to motions that are below shoulder height, you can begin working on your posture and positioning from day one. Your posture is extremely important! We all tend to have less than perfect posture, and it becomes even more evident and important postoperatively. Try to

keep your arms, shoulders, and neck as relaxed as possible. Avoid hunching forward, rolling your shoulders in, slouching down, or having your shoulders hunch up toward your ears. These are all positions that you will feel like assuming when you come out of surgery, but they will cause you more pain down the road and actually delay return to movement. Use pillows to support your arms in a relaxed position when you are sitting in a chair or in the car.

### Energy Level

Your body is working very hard to heal and that is an “all hands on deck” process internally. I often tell patients to picture that internally, their body is doing the equivalent of a triathlon every day during the initial phases of healing. Your job is to reserve the energy your body needs to do this by being patient and prioritizing where to use your energy. Do you want to have the energy to play with your kids when they are home? Do you want enough energy to get to your follow-up appointment with your surgeon? Then prioritize those things that day and let someone else cook dinner or clear the table. A note about computer usage: You might feel tempted to check on work emails and think that you can rest your body AND spend the day on the computer. Sadly, this is not the case. Keep computer time to a minimum in the first two weeks. Find some good books and podcasts, or some funny movies to pass the time. Nap when you need to, and follow carefully the medication schedule provided by your doctor. Brains can be fuzzy after anesthesia and often you have lots of

different medications to take at different times of the day, so keep a chart of your medicine and the times you take them—for both you and your family to follow.

You will likely be mentally ready to start moving long before your body is ready to do so. Please remember there is no way to fast-track the physiological phases of healing. Doing too much, too soon can increase swelling, increase your risk of infection, and delay your return to regular activity.

## Sleep

One of the most frequent questions I receive from patients both pre- and post-surgically is how to sleep comfortably following surgery. It is often very hard to find a comfortable sleeping position during the first week or two. Many women still have drains placed on one or both sides, and their medical team has likely instructed them to sleep on their back, avoiding side or stomach sleeping. Very few people I meet are natural back sleepers, so adopting the different sleeping position can add to the discomfort. I suggest several ways you can find increased comfort and get better sleep after surgery: Be sure you have an ample supply of extra pillows around post-surgery. If you want to continue sleeping in your bed, I recommend sleeping on an angle by purchasing a bed wedge pillow. Make sure the wedge is wide enough so you can easily rest your arms comfortably on each side, with your hands resting on your abdomen. Use pillows to help support your arms in this position and place a pillow under your knees to help support your back. Your body should be relaxed when you are resting and sleeping, so the pillows can keep you in a comfortable and unguarded position. Make sure the pillow under your head is not so bulky that it pushes your head forward while you

sleep, which can cause neck and shoulder pain. Some people find it difficult to get in and out of bed initially, so please ask for help. Another option is to sleep in a recliner, with pillows positioned to help support your arms, as previously described. Avoid sleeping sitting up on your couch as this position will cause increased neck and back pain. Before getting out of bed or getting up from a sitting position, sit at the edge of the bed or chair for a few moments to make sure you are not dizzy or light-headed.

## Rehabilitation

Physical therapy with a cancer rehab professional following breast surgery can be vital in helping you regain functional mobility, decrease pain, and reduce swelling. Everyone has different rehab needs, with some people needing only three or four visits while others need to be followed throughout chemotherapy and radiation. It depends on your prior level of function, your level of involvement, and the type of surgery that you had.

The primary goal of physical therapy is to get you back to all the things you love to do in the safest and most efficient way possible. Nothing you do in physical therapy should cause you increased pain. In fact, most people leave physical therapy feeling better because their movement is increased, their pain is decreased, and they have more energy. Research shows that patients who are followed by rehab using a prospective surveillance model—that is, monitoring patients throughout all phases of treatment starting preoperatively—can gain an increased quality of life by preventing problems before they happen and mitigating ones that appear quickly.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Your doctor will clear you for physical

therapy when you are ready. Some physicians clear patients two weeks post-op and others prefer their patients to wait until four to six weeks post-surgery. Ask your doctor to refer you to a clinic that has experience with oncology rehabilitation in your area.

## Summary

Recovering from surgery can feel like a long and hard process. Keep in mind that it *will* get better, remember to be patient, and ask for help from those around you. Your family and friends are your best allies and very much want to help you get through this part of your cancer recovery. Let them cook for you, drive for you, and even take your car in for service if needed. Be an advocate for yourself and protect your rest time as an investment in your health. We often think we can do it all and that we don't need help from those around us. We think we will heal faster and not experience the normal phases of recovery because we just don't have time for that in our lives. You can't will your body to heal at light speed, but you can do everything in your power to set yourself up for success by heeding the suggestions in this article, eating well, and following the directions of your doctor. Invest in your health and take the time your body needs to get back to all the things you love to do in the world. Your body will thank you!

<sup>1</sup> Springer BA, Levy E, McGarvey C, et al. Pre-operative assessment enables early diagnosis and recovery of shoulder function in patients with breast cancer. *Breast Cancer Res Treat.* 2010; 120: 135-147.

<sup>2</sup> McNeely ML, Campbell K, Ospina M, et al. Exercise interventions for upper-limb dysfunction due to breast cancer treatment. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev.* 2010; 6.

<sup>3</sup> Stout, Nicole L, MPT, CLT-LANA, Binkley, Jill M, PT, et al. A prospective surveillance model for rehabilitation for women with breast cancer. *Cancer.* 2012; 2191-2200.