

## **ABC (after breast cancer) ex and education class**

*1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Friday every month at High Point Cancer Center 11am-noon.*

*By: Cassandra Downtin, PT 336 878-6915 for appointments*

Your recovery from breast surgery is a gradual process. Returning to your usual level of activity will take some time and working up to it is slow. It may take 4-6 weeks to return to your normal shoulder motion. It may take a while for your arm to “feel” normal again. As your body heals, you may feel “different” things that are normal and will improve over time, such as: numbness/burning/tingling, rib/shoulder/arm pain, or phantom pain (pain that feels like it’s coming from the removed breast or nipple). IT’S ALL NORMAL! Using pillows is a great way to make you comfortable while resting- under your arm or surrounding your body. It’s also great to get back to your old self again!

- **1. Protect your arm**- protect against... sunburn (use sunblock), extreme temperatures (hot tubs, saunas or even very cold temps can cause rebound swelling), minor injuries (use gloves), irritated or dry skin (use lotion). Avoid getting blood pressure checked or needle sticks in that arm, *from now on* (can trigger lymphedema). If you get a scratch or cut on your skin, wash it with soap and water, apply topical antibiotics, and observe for signs of infection.
- **2. Watch for signs of infection**- call your doctor immediately if you notice any of these symptoms in your arm/chest: Redness, Warmth, Increased Pain, Swelling, Fever, Rash, Flu-like symptoms or Sudden Decrease in Motion. Early treatment of possible infection is important.
- **3. Assess your arm’s tolerance to progression of activity**- Gently squeeze your forearm, seeing if a “pit” stays, to make sure

your arm did not get swollen or harder than normal. *Gradually* build up the duration and intensity of any activity or exercise. Monitor arm for changes in size, shape, soreness, heaviness, or firmness. Take frequent rest breaks during activity as needed. “Know your body- Don’t get overly tired! Listen to your body!”

- **4. Gradual return to exercise/activity**- it is OK to start moving your arm. Initially exercises are easy. For example:
  1. **Make a fist and open hand**
  2. **Move your wrist in a circle**
  3. **Turn palm up and down**
  4. **Bend and straighten elbow**
- **5. Restore normal function of your arm**- with the goal of regaining full flexibility, great posture, and normal strength. Relaxation and posture exercises include:
  5. **Slow deep breaths in and out**
  6. **Shoulder rolls**
  7. **Shoulder blade squeeze/stick chest out**
  8. **Back bends**

Shoulder stretches include:

9. **Table slides- to front and out to side**
10. **Doorway/corner stretch**
11. **Wall slides- to front and out to side**
12. **Hand slide up back**
13. **Hands clasped behind head, elbows out**

1.



Make fist, then open wide.

2.



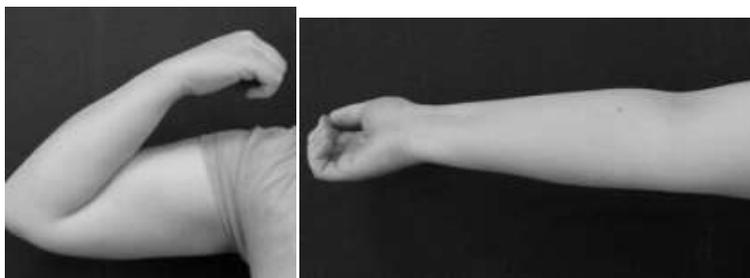
Move wrist up and around in a circle- both ways.

3.



Start with palm up, then flip hand over and turn palm down. Repeat.

4.



Bend/straighten elbow.

5. (No Picture) Take a deep breath in, using your diaphragm, letting you “belly hand” swell out, hold a second. Then let the deep breath out slowly. Repeat.



6. Rotate shoulders in circle. Repeat 10x both ways.



7. Stretch arms down and back, squeezing shoulder blades together/sticking chest out. Hold 10 seconds. 5x.



8. Arch backwards, sticking chest out. Hold 10 seconds. 3x.

Stretches should be gentle! Gradually progress to holding stretches up to 30 seconds 3x. Continue with stretches as long as it feels tight. Can use opposite hand to “pull” on tight skin/scar during stretching.



9. Sit, rest arm on table and lean to gently slide arm forward, until gentle stretch. Hold 10 seconds. 5x.



Sit sideways to table, slide arm out to the side, leaning armpit toward table. Hold 10 seconds. Repeat 5x.



10. Stretch arms out in a doorway or corner. Step through with one foot and shift weight forward, until chest stretch is felt, gently. Can change where you feel stretch by moving arms higher or lower. Hold 20 seconds. Repeat 3x.

Stretches should be gentle! Gradually progress to holding stretches up to 30 seconds 3x. Continue with stretches as long as it feels tight. Can use opposite hand to “pull” on tight skin/scar during stretching.



**11.** Face wall, slide forearm up wall, can use other hand to gently push it up higher. OR can clasp hands together and slide up wall. Hold 10 seconds. Repeat 5x.



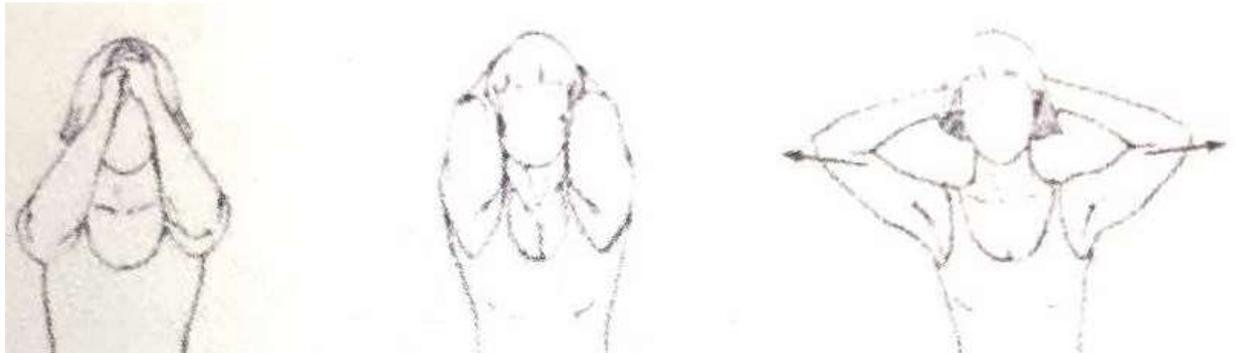
Sideways to wall, slide hand up wall until a gentle stretch is felt in armpit. Hold 10 seconds. Repeat 5x.



12. Put your hand behind your back and slide up. Can use your other hand, or a stick, or a towel to help if needed.

Hold 5 seconds. Repeat 5x.

13.



Clasp hands and put behind head. Stretch your elbows outward. Hold 10 seconds. Repeat 5x.

### **What is LYMPHEDEMA?**

It is a build-up of fluid under the skin.

Normally, your body carries a clear protein-rich fluid called “lymph” through a special network of vessels, called your lymphatic system. Lymphedema happens when damage occurs to this system and lymph cannot move through the body. After surgery or radiation for breast cancer, you could develop lymphedema on the side of your surgery. It can happen in any remaining breast tissue, under the armpit, or in the arm/hand. Lymphedema can happen in the first few months of cancer treatment or it may happen months to years later. The affected area usually feels heavy, swollen, less flexible, weak, with tight skin and clothes may fit tighter. There is no way to completely prevent lymphedema. You can lower your chances of having lymphedema by following the 5 steps above, and keeping a healthy weight. Weight gain and obesity increase your chances of lymphedema. You may want to wear a compression sleeve/gauntlet if you fly on airplanes- the low cabin pressure has been known to trigger lymphedema.



If you notice swelling, ask your doctor to send you to a lymphedema therapist to get treatment. Once treated and you learn to manage it, lymphedema will not progress through all the stages. You can stop it.

**What is SCAR MOBILITY?** It's how easily your skin moves at your incision. If it is having difficulty moving up/ down/ left / right, you can gently put your hand directly over your scar and "pull" it in that tight direction- holding for 30 seconds or so. You won't hurt it.

**What is CORDING?** You may notice a pulling sensation in your arm, along with "cords" that appear in the armpit, elbow, forearm or wrist. Cording is actually inflamed lymph vessels that usually go away with stretching after a few months. If your cording is painful and limiting movement, a physical therapist can do myofascial stretching and skin traction to release these adhesions.



This is what cording looks like...

