

Recovery and acceptance: Your body: A painful arm and lymphedema

Physical consequences: a painful arm and lymphedema

Painful arm, painful shoulder – exercises A breast operation and the scarring it causes can have a limiting effect on your arm movements. The shoulder-joint is very close to the operated area. Moving the arm can be painful at first.

Directly after the operation, arm exercises will improve the mobility of the arm and shoulder. If necessary, you can be referred to a physiotherapist. In case you need radiation therapy, you have to be able to rotate your arm sufficiently.

After the operation, you should try to move your arm as normally as possible, but be careful with lifting things and avoid activities which might overburden you. It is important in all activities (sport as well), that you slowly build up again.

The skin in the operated area will be numb for a long time, because the nerve channels have been damaged. It is a strange sensation, but you do get used to it and it gets better over time. Include this part of your body in your moisturising care regime, even though you feel nothing.

Lymphedema – skin therapy A much-occurring complication in breast operations is lymphedema. This is the accumulation of fluid, which may happen if the lymph nodes have been removed, but also as a result of radiation in the breast.

If there are aggressive cells in the lymph nodes in the underarms, a lymphnode dissection often takes place. This means that most of the lymph nodes in the underarm on the side of the affected breast have to be removed.

Positive lymph nodes, those with cancer cells, are most often radiated. The lymphatic system can also be damaged by radiation and operation, even if the lymph nodes in the underarm are not removed. This can cause the accumulation of fluid on the chest (thorax) and in the arm.

If your arm is obviously swollen, you must ask for a referral to a skin therapist or a specialised physiotherapist. This kind of swelling can also occur much later. The arm can feel heavy. The surgeon or nursing specialist will examine and sometimes measure this at check-ups. However, do keep an eye on it yourself!

Skin therapists apply a particular massage which stimulates the lymphatic system. Often, the skin therapist starts off with bandages, to treat the worst swelling. This is because swaddling helps your arm to return to its normal proportions and this has to happen first.

Your arm will remain vulnerable when the lymph nodes are removed. In order to prevent lymphedema (also later), it is important to spare your arm. Don't lift too heavily and let blood-pressure and blood tests be done

on the healthy side. Work at home and in the garden with (household) gloves, to prevent cuts.

If you do get a wound on your arm, it may get easily infected. Cooling the wound in the early stages already helps a great deal.

Often, though, an antibiotic cure is needed. If you are travelling to another country, you must carry such a cure with you, just in case. Always treat a (small) wound quickly and thoroughly, with an antiseptic, otherwise it may lead to 'erysipelas'

Ways of keeping your oedema arm in good condition, are by: 1. swimming; 2. regularly using a stress ball to stimulate the lymphatic flow; 3. keeping your arm raised from time to time; 4. avoiding extreme heat and cold.

Many women with lymphedema wear a special, machine-knitted, stretchy arm-socking, which keeps the arm in its proper shape. It also massages the lymphatic vessels and gets them pumping. In most cases, your health insurance will pay for the stocking.

There are also arm-sockings in attractive and cheerful colours, to wear over the knitted one. Some women wear their stocking at all times during the day, others wear it whilst practicing a sport, walking and exercising, or on flights.