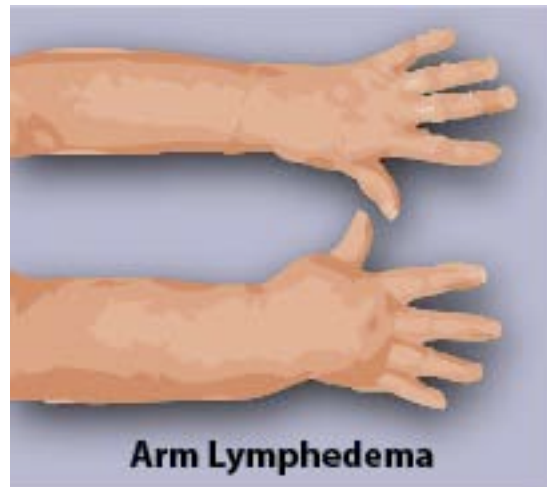


How to Do Arm Lymphoedema Exercises

By Pam Stephan, About.com Guide

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Prepare for Arm Lymphedema Exercises



Arm Lymphedema

Illustration © Pam Stephan

After lymph node removal, you may experience arm lymphoedema. Some extra fluid may build up in your hand or arm, causing them to swell. The idea behind arm exercise and lymphoedema is that arm muscle contractions may help move lymph fluid back to veins in your armpit and neck, so it can rejoin your blood circulation. When the lymph fluid goes back into circulation, your swelling should go down.

These simple gentle exercises can help the proteins in lymph fluid to be reabsorbed, and your arm lymphoedema symptoms to diminish or disappear. Be sure to **discuss your exercise plans with your doctor** - before you start.

If you have recently had surgery, wait until your surgical drains and sutures are out, before trying these exercises. It is usually safe to begin exercising 1 week following your surgery. Do these exercises gently - you're not body building here - and do not exercise to the point of pain.

Always wear your compression sleeve (if you have been fitted with one) on your affected arm while exercising. Stop exercising if your arm begins to swell or turn red.

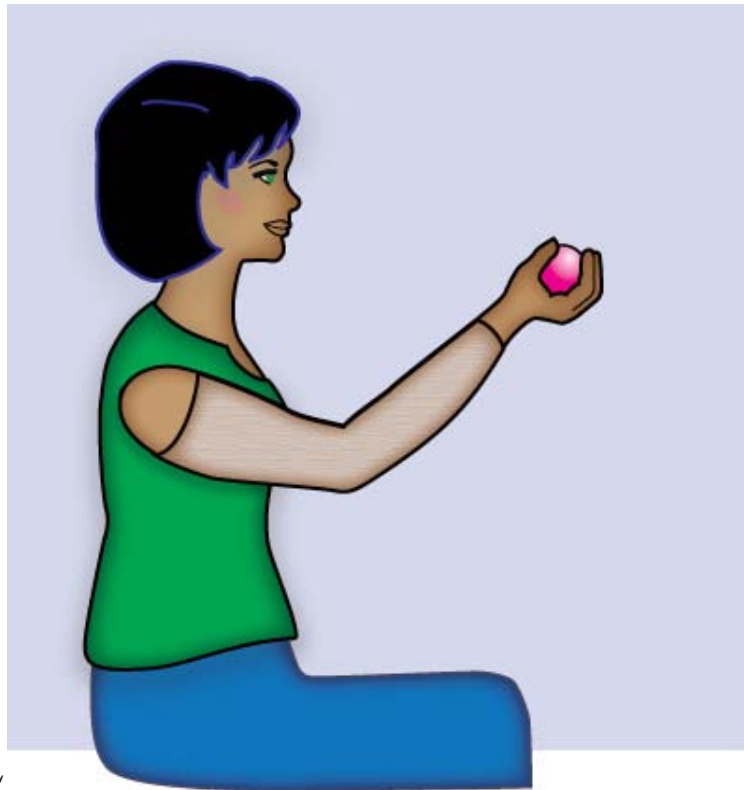
Dress in loose, comfortable clothing - style is not important for these exercises. **Warm your affected arm and hand** before starting to exercise - take a shower, tub soak, or use a warm compress for about 20 minutes. Be regular about doing your arm lymphoedema exercises. This will aid your recovery and give you the best results.

Here's what you need on hand to get started:

- A set of light (500g-1kg) free weights
- Your compression sleeve (if you have been fitted with one)
- A small flexible ball (ie. stress ball)
- A hard chair to sit on
- An area big enough to lay down on
- *Optional:* A pair of walking poles: Fitness, Nordic, or Exerstriding poles

Ready? Let's start with some seated exercises

Ball Squeeze - Seated Exercise



Ball Squeeze Exercise

Illustration © Pam Stephan

Arm lymphoedema can happen after lymph nodes are removed during breast cancer surgery. Gentle exercise can help reduce swelling caused by lymphoedema.

You can do the ball squeeze exercise with your surgery-side arm, as well as with your unaffected arm. Use a flexible ball that is a bit larger than your palm. Your exercise ball should not be heavy and should offer some resistance to your grip. The proper ball will spring back into shape when you release it, but will require some pressure to squeeze it. You will feel muscles in your fingers, lower and upper arm working as you do the ball squeeze. This muscle movement should help move excess lymph fluid back into circulation and help you avoid swelling.

- Sit or stand with good posture - keep your back and neck straight and your shoulders relaxed. Grasp your exercise ball lightly

between your palm and fingers. Extend your arm in front of you, holding your arm higher than your heart.

- While keeping your arm elevated, squeeze the ball with your fingers as tightly as you can. Hold the squeeze for about 3 seconds, then release.

Repeat the ball squeeze exercise 5 to 7 times. If your arm tires quickly, take breaks. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do the ball squeeze several times without resting.

Elbow Flexion - Seated Exercise

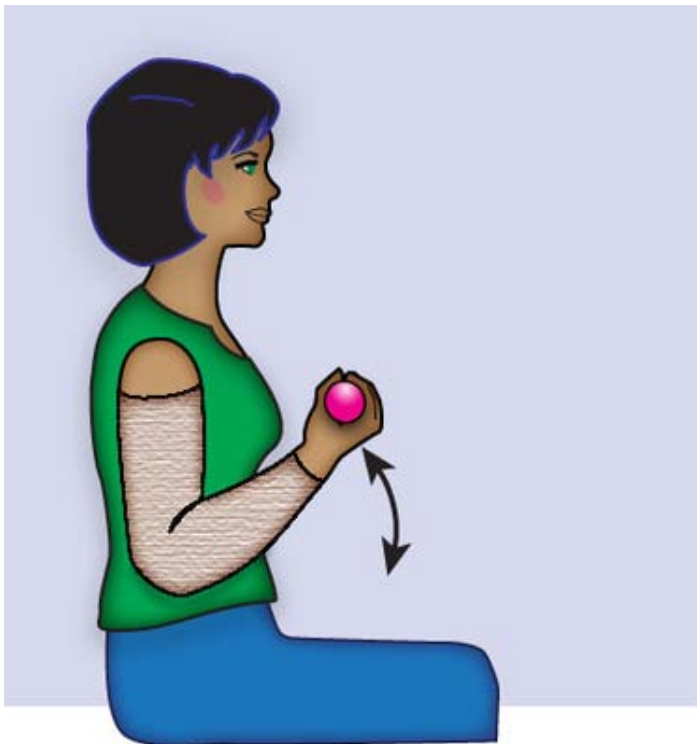


Illustration © Pam Stephan

The elbow flexion exercise uses your upper arm muscles, which are close to your axillary lymph nodes. As these muscles work, lymph fluid can be pumped back into your system and absorbed, reducing arm lymphoedema.

You can do the elbow flexion exercise with both arms. Use a light free weight in each hand during this exercise. You will feel muscles in your lower and upper arm working as you do the elbow flexion.

- Sit or stand with good posture - keep your back and neck straight and your shoulders relaxed. Hold a one-pound free weight in each hand with your palm up. Rest your hands on your lap.
- Slowly bend your elbows and lift both hands towards your chest. When your hands are halfway up, stop lifting and hold the position for about six seconds.
- Now slowly lower your hands back down to your lap. Rest a bit.
- Repeat this exercise 10 times, always moving gently.

If your arm gets tired or begins to swell, take breaks. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do this exercise without resting. Try using heavier weights as you feel comfortable.

Gentle exercise can help reduce arm lymphoedema caused by lymph node removal. Here's how to do the elbow extension exercise with small free weights.

Elbow Extension - Floor Exercise

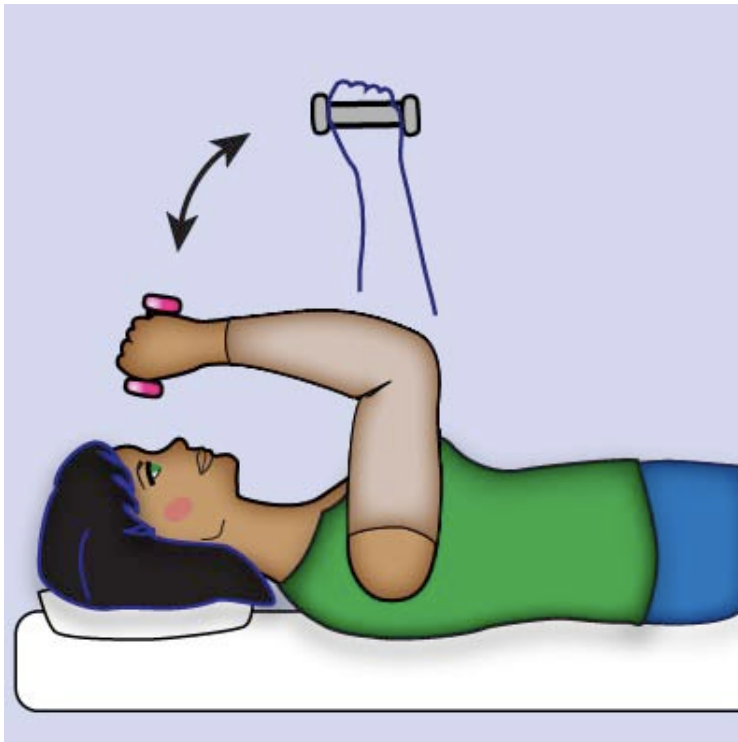


Illustration © Pam Stephan

You can do the elbow extension exercise with both arms. You will feel muscles in your lower and upper arm working as you do the elbow extension. Gentle muscle movement should help excess lymph fluid move back into circulation and help you avoid arm swelling.

Lie down on your back, keeping your back and neck in a straight line. To help keep your lower back flat, elevate your knees. Your feet should be flat on the floor, shoulder width apart. Don't keep your knees together - like your feet, they should be spaced apart. Use a one-pound free weight in each hand during this exercise. Your hands should be shoulder's width apart during this exercise.

- Keep your back and neck straight and your shoulders relaxed. Hold a one-pound free weight in each hand with your palms facing in towards each other. Raise both arms straight up above your body.
- Slowly bend your elbows and lower both hands towards your chest. When your elbows are bent at a 90 degree angle (see picture), stop moving and hold the position for about six seconds.
- Now slowly raise your hands back up to Position 1. Rest a bit.
- Repeat this exercise 10 times, always moving gently.

If your arms feel tired or they start to swell, take breaks. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do this exercise without stopping. Try using heavier weights as you feel comfortable.

Shoulder Horizontal Adduction

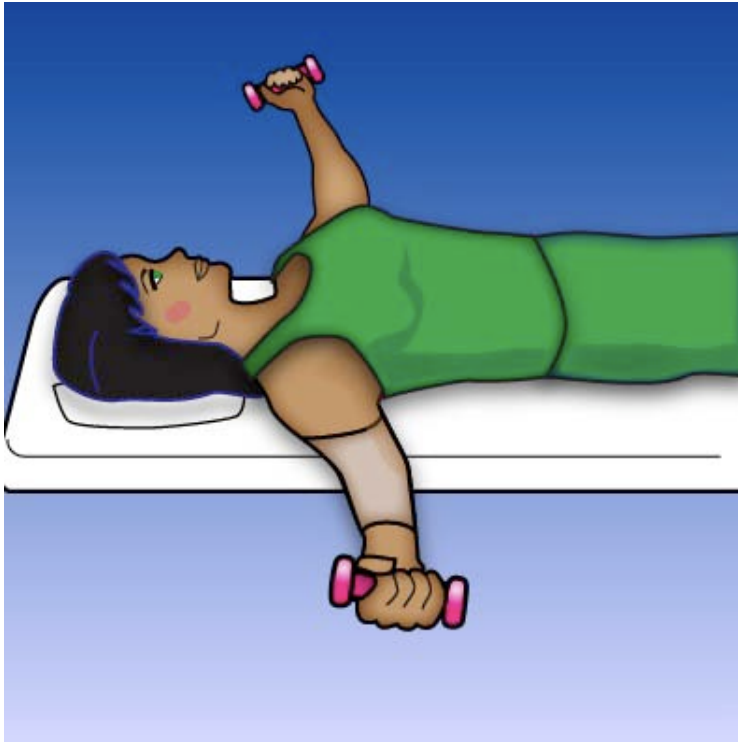


Illustration © Pam Stephan

Shoulder adduction means to bring your shoulder and arm closer to the midline or center of your body, in a horizontal plane. This gentle exercise uses your shoulder and arm muscles to help reduce arm lymphoedema caused by lymph node removal. Here's how to do the shoulder horizontal adduction with small free weights.

You can do the shoulder horizontal adduction with both arms. You will feel muscles in your shoulder and arm working as you do the shoulder adduction. Gentle muscle movement should help excess lymph fluid move back into circulation and help you avoid arm swelling.

Lie down on your back, with your knees elevated. Keep your back and neck in a straight line. Your feet should be flat on the floor, with your feet and knees shoulder width apart. Use a one-pound free weight in each hand during this exercise.

- To begin, keep your back and neck straight and your shoulders relaxed. Extend your arms away from your body, resting them on the floor. Hold a one-pound free weight in each hand with your palms facing the ceiling.
- Without bending your elbows, slowly raise both arms straight up above your body until you can bring your palms together. Hold this position for about six seconds.
- Now slowly lower your arms back up to Position 2. Rest a bit.
- Repeat this exercise 6 times, always moving gently.

When your arms feel tired or start to swell, just rest. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do this exercise without stopping. Try using heavier weights as you feel comfortable.

Shoulder Flexion - Standing Exercise

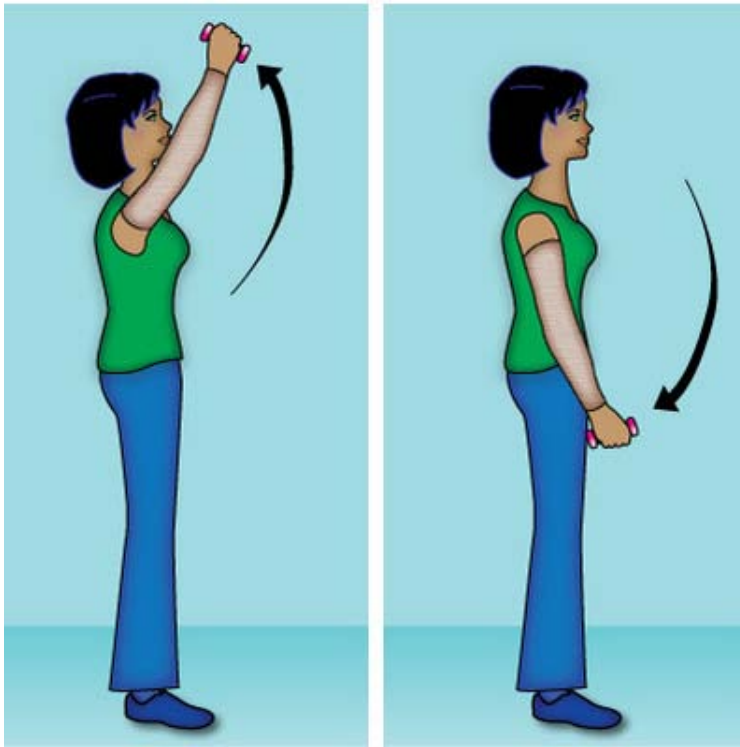


Illustration © Pam Stephan

Shoulder flexion uses your deltoid (shoulder) muscles and the front of your shoulder. Holding a light free weight while doing the shoulder flexion helps put some light pressure on your axillary lymph node

area, and may help it drain.

You can do the shoulder flexion exercise with both arms. You will feel muscles in your shoulder and arm working as you do the shoulder flexion. Gentle muscle movement should help excess lymph fluid move back into circulation and help you avoid arm lymphoedema.

- Stand with good posture, arms at your sides. Hold a one-pound free weight in each hand, palms toward your body.
- Slowly raise both arms, using a gentle controlled motion. When your arms are almost directly overhead, pause and hold this position for six counts.
- Now slowly lower your arms - don't swing, but use control - until your hands are back beside your body. Rest.
- Repeat the shoulder flexion 10 times.

When your arms feel tired or if they start to swell, stop and rest. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do this exercise without stopping. Try using heavier weights as you feel comfortable.

Shoulder Abduction - Standing Exercise

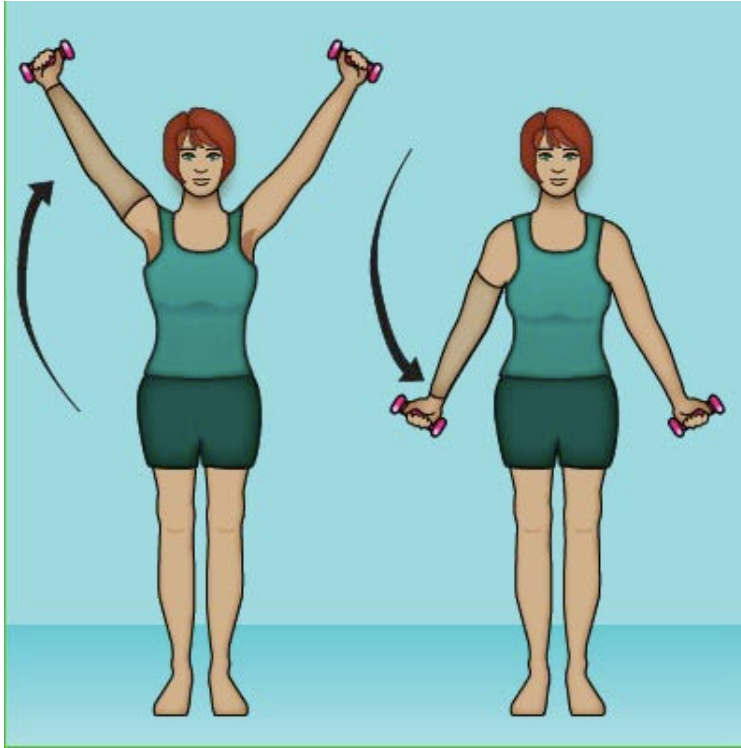


Illustration © Pam Stephan

Shoulder abduction means to move your shoulder and arms away from the midline or center of your body. This is the opposite of shoulder *adduction*, which is moving your arms in towards your center. Holding a light free weight while doing the shoulder abduction helps put some gentle pressure on your axillary lymph node area, and may help your excess lymph fluid to drain.

You can do the shoulder abduction exercise with both arms. You will feel muscles in your shoulders and arms as well as your shoulder blade working as you do the shoulder flexion. Controlled, gentle muscle movement should help excess lymph fluid move back into circulation and help you avoid arm lymphoedema.

- Stand with good posture, arms at your sides. Hold a one-pound free weight in each hand, palms facing forward.
- Slowly raise both arms out to your sides, using a gentle controlled motion. When your arms are not quite overhead, pause and hold

this position for six counts.

- Now slowly lower your arms - don't drop your arms, but use a controlled motion - until your hands are back beside your body. Rest.
- Repeat the shoulder abduction 10 times.

When your arms feel tired or if they start to swell, stop and rest. You will gradually build up enough strength and stamina to do this exercise without stopping. Try using heavier weights as you feel comfortable.

Pole Walking - Standing Exercise



Illustration © Pam Stephan

Pole walking, also called Nordic Walking, uses your arms, shoulders, upper chest and back muscles. While you're getting a good cardio workout, all your major joints are exercised, and your muscles will get stretched and lengthened.

When done properly, pole walking is done while your arms are relaxed.

Your shoulders will be working in a swinging motion, similar to shoulder flexion, but with a greater range of motion. This continuous motion should help excess lymph fluid move back into circulation and help you avoid arm lymphoedema.

Use a set of fitness walking poles that have a hand strap at the top. The poles should remain behind your stride and always point diagonally backwards as you walk. These will help you exercise your shoulders, assist with balance, and provide support for knee joints and leg muscles. Keep your shoulders relaxed and hold the poles near your body.

- Step forward with your right foot, and swing your left arm forward, up to waist height. Your left pole hits the ground just behind your right foot.
- Keep your torso upright, don't lean forward as you walk.
- Let your right arm straighten out behind you, forming a line that ends at the tip of your right pole. Roll your left foot from heel to toe as you walk, pushing off with your toe.
- Alternate feet and poles, while maintaining good posture as you pole walk.

For a complete explanation of pole walking technique and to learn more about the benefits of this exercise, visit the About.com [Walking site](#).

Sources:

The Effect Of Gentle Arm Exercise And Deep Breathing On Secondary Arm Lymphedema. A.L. Moseley, N.B. Piller, C.J. Carati. *Lymphology* 38 (2005) 136-145.

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