HOME EXERCISE PROGRAM

After Shoulder Surgery: Home Exercises

William McLaughlin, MD | Sports Medicine Surgery | Advanced Bone & Joint

Early home exercises for the first 2 weeks after shoulder surgery. Your surgeon will tell you how long to wear your sling and when shoulder motion may begin. Always follow the specific instructions of your surgeon and physical therapist, which take priority over this handout.

General Principles

TOP PRIORITIES

- **Protect the repair** — the shoulder muscles must not do the work yet.
- Keep the hand, wrist, and elbow moving to prevent stiffness.
- Control swelling and pain.

- **Frequency.** Do the exercises 3 times per day, about 10 repetitions each, unless told otherwise.
- **Pain.** Mild discomfort is expected. Stop and rest if pain becomes sharp or severe.
- **Ice.** Ice or use your cold-therapy device 15–20 minutes after each session and several times a day. Keep a thin cloth between the ice and your skin.
- **Shoulder motion.** Do not move the shoulder on your own — no reaching, lifting the arm, or reaching behind your back — unless your surgeon or therapist has shown you specific shoulder exercises.
- **No lifting** anything heavier than a coffee cup with the operated arm, and do not push up from a chair or bed with it.
- **No driving** while wearing the sling or taking narcotic pain medication.

SLING USE

- Wear the sling at all times, including while sleeping, except for exercises, bathing, and dressing — unless your surgeon tells you otherwise.
- Many patients sleep best semi-upright in a recliner or propped on pillows. A small pillow behind the elbow keeps it from dropping behind the body.
- When the sling is off, keep the arm relaxed at your side or resting in your lap.
- To wash under the arm, lean forward and let the arm hang. Do not lift it out to the side.

Home Exercises | Days 1–14

GOALS FOR THIS PHASE

- Full motion of the hand, wrist, and elbow.
- Good posture and shoulder blade position.
- Gentle, relaxed shoulder motion only as allowed.

Remove the sling for these exercises, keeping the operated arm relaxed.

Exercises

1. **Hand squeezes** — Squeeze a soft ball or rolled washcloth, hold 3 seconds, relax. 10–20 reps. Can be done in the sling throughout the day.
2. **Wrist bends and circles** — Bend the wrist up and down, then make slow circles in both directions. 10 reps each.
3. **Elbow bends (assisted)** — Sitting with the arm at your side, use your **other hand** to bend the elbow fully, then let it straighten fully. 10 reps. Let the other hand do the work — this protects biceps and SLAP repairs.
4. **Forearm turns** — With the elbow bent and resting at your side, turn the palm up, then down. 10 reps.
5. **Shoulder blade squeezes** — Sitting tall, gently pinch the shoulder blades back and together. Hold 5 seconds. 10 reps. Do not shrug the shoulders up toward the ears.
6. **Neck motion** — Slowly turn the head side to side, then tilt the ear toward each shoulder. 5 reps each direction.
7. **Pendulums** (unless told not to) — Lean forward with the good hand on a table and let the operated arm hang relaxed. Gently rock your body so the arm swings in small circles. The arm muscles stay relaxed — the body creates the motion. 30–60 seconds, each direction.

WHEN TO CALL YOUR SURGEON

- Fever over 101°F, chills, or increasing redness, warmth, or drainage from the incisions.
- Numbness, tingling, or coldness in the hand or fingers that does not go away.
- Calf pain, swelling, or tenderness — possible blood clot.
- **Sudden shortness of breath or chest pain — call 911.**
- Pain that is severe or getting worse despite ice, rest, and medication.
- A fall onto the operated arm, or a sudden pop with new pain or loss of motion.

This protocol is a general guideline. Progression is patient-specific and at the discretion of William McLaughlin, MD.