



MASTECTOMY REHAB PROTOCOL

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BACKGROUND

Over 100,000 patients undergo mastectomy per year. Early postoperative rehabilitation is recommended to protect wound healing, restore range of motion, reduce muscle atrophy, screen for axillary web syndrome, lymphedema and other complications. Expected post-operative pain, scarring, and myofascial restrictions have an immediate impact on shoulder mobility and function. Without post-op guidelines, early, aggressive mobilization can impair tissue healing and increase pain. In contrast, protected and delayed mobility may compromise lymphatic circulation and tissue healing, increasing the risk of lymphedema, adhesive capsulitis, and rotator cuff dysfunction. Initial protected mobility typically begins in the first postoperative week when cleared by the surgeon, with progression and formal reassessment commonly scheduled at 4-6 weeks to advance range of motion, strengthening, and to screen for complications. Evidence supports early, structured rehabilitation, minimizing unnecessary immobilization to enhance recovery of shoulder mobility after mastectomy. This protocol provides a standardized recovery plan to be coordinated by the surgical team and licensed rehabilitation professionals.

AUTHORS

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DISCLAIMER

This Mastectomy Rehab Protocol is a general framework for recovery and should be used as a guide by qualified professionals within their scope of practice and applicable regulations. It does not replace medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment from a licensed healthcare provider. Practitioners must assess each client's unique medical history, surgical outcomes, and recovery status before implementing or modifying any part of this protocol. Clients should consult their primary care provider, oncologist, or relevant medical professional before beginning or changing their rehabilitation plan. The practitioner is responsible for ensuring all interventions are safe, evidence-informed, and tailored to the individual needs of each client.

Mastectomy Rehab Protocol

Name: _____

DOB: _____

Dr. _____

DOS: _____

Mastectomy recovery tips before and during radiation:

Monitor differences in vital signs at rest and activity

Prioritize skin care on radiated tissue. Incision protection during bed mobility, transfers, and ADLs (e.g. toileting, showering)

Initiate walking program per vital signs and activity tolerance

Consult with surgical team on specific lifting and ROM restrictions

Screen:
*DASH or SPADI, sleep hygiene, mental health, sensation, pain, incision care, positioning, axillary web syndrome, lymphedema

Mastectomy Rehab	Muscle Health Recovery Program (weeks)									
ADLs and respiration	1	2	3	4	5	6	7-11	12-17	18-23	24+
Precautions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain shoulder elevation below 90 deg until cleared by surgeon Adhere to surgery specific post-op lifting and weight-bearing precautions DVT screening and risk reduction 										
Breathing interventions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incentive spirometer & lateral costal breathing with shoulder ROM progressions Intercostal manual facilitation 										
ADL/IADL Modifications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptive equipment training Energy conservation training Pain education training–TENS, self-touch, acceptance training Transfer training with core and pelvic floor muscle activation Bowel and bladder management 										
Muscle activation and ROM	1	2	3	4	5	6	7-11	12-17	18-23	24+
Pain-free range of motion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cervical spine, traps, trunk, lower extremities, unaffected shoulder (if applicable), elbow, wrist ROM in all directions Gravity eliminated or shoulder pulley: within recommended ROM 										
Restore upright posture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occiput wall test and endurance training Walking: gradually progressing distance, surfaces, or time (e.g. 10 min) Initiate core activation 										
Mobility and edema management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve lymphatic return with breathwork, movement, and postural changes Post-op compression 										
Lymphedema Screen if Lymph Nodes are removed/affected: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Girth measurements LLIS Questionnaire** 										

Mastectomy Rehab Protocol

General mastectomy recovery tips:

Continue monitoring differences in vital signs at rest and activity

Initiate indirect scar mobilization immediately

Initiate direct scar mobilization when incision is healed

Progress walking program per vital signs and activity tolerance

Increase tolerance towards full ROM, weightbearing, and strengthening

Ongoing screen: *DASH

(Disabilities of Arm, Shoulder, and Hand), or SPADI (Shoulder, Pain, and Disability Index), and **LLIS (Lymphedema Life Impact Questionnaire) if applicable

Mastectomy Rehab	Muscle Health Recovery Program (weeks)									
Incision health, scar massage, and mobility	1	2	3	4	5	6	7-11	12-17	18-23	24+
Wound care education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Signs and symptoms of infection/dehiscence Steristrips or glue remain in place until falls off, until week 4, or when cleared by surgeon 										
Desensitization and scar tissue massage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Above and below incision/drain sites 										
Desensitization and scar tissue massage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> On the incision/scars 										
Muscle endurance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7-11	12-17	18-23	24+
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiate closed chain exercises 										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General aerobic training: including bike ergometer, stairmaster, elliptical, treadmill, indoor cycling 										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress walking distance while carrying over 10 lbs 										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shoulder stabilization exercises 										
Muscle strength: 3 x 8 - 20 reps 2-minute rest interval	1	2	3	4	5	6	7-11	12-17	18-23	24+
Resistance: progressive loading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upper body resistance Lower body resistance Abdominal strengthening 										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bodyweight training: weightbearing resistance 										
Moderate intensity activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7-11	12-17	18-23	24+
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Calisthenics, power hiking Mat Pilates 										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Return to trail running, biking progression 										
High intensity activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7-11	12-17	18-23	24+
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Power Yoga Supported pull-ups 										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plyometrics / CrossFit 										

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Continuing Education Resources for Providers:

Susannah Haarmann, PT, WCS, CLT
Breast Cancer Rehab Patient Education

Handouts <https://www.pelvichealthresources.com/courses/the-breast-bundle-pdf>

KickPink Comprehensive Breast Cancer Rehab Course <https://kickpink.pro/courses/level-1>

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<https://michelle-lyons-muliebrity-education.teachable.com/p/breast-cancer-rehab-coach>

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<https://klosetraining.com/course/online/strength-abc/>