



Musculo-skeletal

North Bristol **NHS**  
NHS Trust

# Managing at home with your arm in a polysling following shoulder surgery



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## Introduction

This leaflet is intended to help prepare you for managing your everyday activities at home after your shoulder surgery. Patients who know what to expect are better prepared for their surgery and are more able to manage at home after their surgery.

### Restrictions in movement following shoulder surgery

You may be told that you will have to restrict movements of your shoulder after your surgery. This will depend on what surgery you have.

Your surgeon and the physiotherapist should explain any restrictions to you so you know what to expect.

If these shoulder restrictions apply to you, you must make sure that you keep to these to avoid causing damage to the surgery on your shoulder.

This leaflet will cover several activities of daily living to show you how to manage within your shoulder restrictions.

### How to fit the polysling



**Photo 1**

This is what the polysling looks like when not fitted.

**1.** The polysling is made of lightweight foam. Most people find it comfortable to wear when fitted correctly.

It is made up of a trough that your forearm sits in, supported by straps.

It works by supporting your arm in a position to immobilise your operated shoulder.



**Photo 2**

**2.** If someone is fitting the sling for you, support your operated arm with your elbow bent to 90 degrees (a right angle) using your unoperated arm. Slide the “trough” part of the sling in from behind so that your elbow fits snugly into the corner. See photo 2.



**Photo 3**

**3.** If you are fitting the sling without help, ensure that you are seated, with your elbow bent to 90 degrees (a right angle). You will find it more comfortable if your arm is supported on a pillow. Then slide the “trough” part of the sling in from the side and ensure that your elbow fits snugly into the corner. See photo 3.



**Photo 4**

**4.** Fasten the strap nearest to your elbow across your forearm, it should be approximately one inch below your elbow crease. It attaches with Velcro. See photo 4.



**Photo 5**

**5.** Attach the wrist strap approximately one inch from your wrist (towards your elbow). It attaches with Velcro. The lower 'D' ring should rest against your body and the upper 'D' ring should face upwards. See photo 5.



**Photo 6**

**6.** The shoulder strap is the long strap that is sewn to the "trough" part of the sling at the elbow end. Take this strap across your back and over your unoperated shoulder. See photo 6.



**Photo 7**

**7.** Feed the shoulder strap through the upper 'D' ring on the wrist strap. See photo 7.



**Photo 8**

**8.** Attach the shoulder strap back onto itself with the Velcro. See photo 8.



**Photo 9**

**9.** If you are told to wear the waist strap, feed the other long strap through the lower 'D' ring and attach it onto itself with the Velcro tab. See photo 9.



**Photo 10**

**10.** Take the waist strap around your back and attach it over the front of the elbow section of the sling. Adjust as necessary so that your arm is held snugly against your body. See photo 10.



**Photo 11**

**11.** The final position should have your arm held close to the front of your body with your knuckles facing forwards. Your wrist should be slightly higher than your elbow to prevent any swelling in your hand. See photo 11.

**12.** You will need to be able to take your sling on and off for physio exercises and, if you are allowed, for washing and dressing.

## Dressing techniques

Practise dressing and undressing one-handed at home before you have your surgery.

### **If you are not allowed to move your arm at all:**

If you are told that you must not move your arm at all for a period after your surgery you must dress over the top of the sling. See photo 1.



**Photo 1**

**1.** This means you will need loose fitting clothes so that your arm will fit inside the body of the garment. For ladies you will not be able to wear a bra with straps as you will not be able to move your shoulder to put your arm into the straps. You may be able to feed a strapless bra under your operated arm and fasten it with help.

### **If you are allowed to move your shoulder (within restrictions):**

If you are told that you can move your shoulder (within restrictions) you can carefully dress under the sling using the following method:



**Photo 2**

**2.** Carefully remove the polysling and let your operated arm hang down to your side. You may find this easier if you sit down. See photo 2.

**3.** Using your unoperated arm feed the sleeve of the garment onto your operated arm all the way up to your armpit. See photo 3.

**4.** Do not use your operated arm to help. Your unoperated arm should do all the work. See photo 4.



**Photo 3**



**Photo 4**

**5.** Next use your unoperated arm to bring the garment across your back. See photo 5.

**6.** Put this arm into the other sleeve of the garment. See photo 6.



**Photo 5**



**Photo 6**



**Photo 7**

**7.** Use your unoperated arm to fasten the front of the garment. See photo 7. Do not use your operated arm to help as you may move your shoulder too much and cause damage to the surgery on your shoulder.

**8.** If the garment does not open at the front, use the method in steps 1 and 2 to feed the sleeve of the garment onto your operated arm. Use your unoperated arm to put the garment over your head. See photo 8.



**Photo 8**



**Photo 9**

**9.** Put your unoperated arm into the other sleeve of the garment. See photo 9.



**Photo 10**

**10.** Use your unoperated arm to pull the garment down over your body. See photo 10.

Once you are dressed you should put the polysling back on straight away unless you have been told that the polysling is for comfort only.

Ladies can use the above method to put a bra on but you will need assistance to fasten it at the back as you will not be able to use both hands.

To get undressed you must use the reverse of the above method – i.e. take your unoperated arm out first then slide the garment off your operated arm as it hangs to your side. Do not move your operated shoulder or arm to help take the garment off. Your unoperated arm should do all the work.

## Suitable clothing:

Make sure you have loose/baggy clothing available for after your surgery as dressing will be more difficult due to your shoulder restrictions. As a general rule - the looser the clothing, the easier it will be to get dressed and undressed.

Some people find that front fastening tops are easier than tops that go over the head. Opt for upper and lower garments with easy fastenings. Shirts and blouses with large buttons will be easier to do up one-handed than small buttons.

Zip up cardigans or coats are almost impossible to do up one-handed, so avoid these. Trousers or skirts with elasticated waists will be easier to manage than buttons, zips and belts.

Wear slip-on or velcro fastening shoes as you will not be able to fasten lace-up shoes one-handed.

## Washing techniques:

Practise washing one-handed at home before you have your surgery.

### **If you are not allowed to move your arm at all:**

If you are told that you must not move your arm at all for a period after your surgery then you must not remove your polysling for washing.

The polysling must not get wet so that means you must wash around it. To wash your armpit of your operated side you should slide a thin flannel or a wet wipe under your armpit. Do not attempt to move your arm away from your body to get access to your armpit as this may cause damage to the surgery on your shoulder. You will not be able to apply deodorant to your armpit, but can apply it around the area (taking care to avoid your surgical wound).

It is easier to wash your lower half at a basin using your unoperated arm, but if you have a low pressure, hand held shower you may be able to wash your lower half with this, taking care not to get your polysling wet.

To wash your hair you will need to lean over a sink or the side of the bath to avoid getting your polysling wet. Do not use your operated arm to help wash your hair. Some people need assistance to wash their hair.

**If you are allowed to move your shoulder (within restrictions):**

If you are told that you may move your shoulder (within restrictions) you can carefully remove the polysling to wash. You should keep your operated arm by your side and you can have a shower or a bath if you feel safe to do so. Your surgical wound will be covered with a shower-proof dressing. Do not run the shower directly over the dressing, or soak it in the bath.

Do not use your operated arm to help wash yourself as this may cause damage to the surgery on your shoulder.



**Photo 11**

To wash your armpit on your operated side you can let your operated arm hang down to your side and lean your body forward slightly. This should open up a gap under your arm. You can then wash your armpit with a flannel, sponge or wet wipe. See photo 11. You can also use this method to access your armpit to apply deodorant.

You may wash your hair in the shower or by leaning over a sink or bath. Do not use your operated arm to help wash your hair. Some people need assistance to wash their hair.

## Toileting:

You will need to wipe yourself with your unoperated arm.

You will also need to be able to adjust your clothing one-handed before and after you go to the toilet.

Practise this at home before you come in for surgery.

## Cleaning teeth:

Putting toothpaste on a brush one-handed can be difficult – try this technique:

Position the toothbrush on its back on the sink with bristles facing up. If it will not stay face up secure it with a piece of blu-tack or grip the toothbrush between your knees. Use your unoperated hand to squeeze toothpaste onto the brush. “Pump” type toothpaste dispensers are more difficult to use one-handed than a conventional tube of toothpaste.

## Kitchen activities:

Practise doing things one-handed in the kitchen before you have your surgery.

If you have no-one to help you in the kitchen you will need to plan meals which will be easy to prepare one-handed.

Here are some tips:

- Ready meals can be easily put into the oven on a baking tray or into a microwave on a plate.
- Pre-prepared fresh or frozen vegetables are available in many shops to prevent the need to wash, chop or peel vegetables.
- When cooking vegetables try to avoid carrying a whole pan of boiling water one-handed. Instead put the vegetables in a frying basket within a saucepan. They can then be lifted out and drained in one movement. Alternatively take the vegetables out with a slotted spoon. Once the saucepan of water has cooled it can be tipped away.
- Remember most tin openers require two hands to operate. You may need to get someone else to open tins for you or look into buying an electric one-handed tin opener.
- Scissors can be useful for opening awkward packets.
- To open jars, grip the jar between your knees and twist the lid off with your unoperated hand. Loosen very tight lids before you come in for your surgery or transfer the contents of the jar into an easy open plastic storage container.
- Put a slightly damp folded cloth under a bowl or plate to stop it sliding around the work surface.

If you are concerned about managing kitchen activities and have no-one to help you, please ask to see the occupational therapist about gadgets to make life easier.

## Eating:

Practise eating one-handed at home before you have your surgery.

Here are some tips:

- Eating out of a bowl may be easier than a flat plate to prevent food being pushed off the edge of the plate.
- Choose foods which are easy to cut up one-handed.
- Using a spoon may be easier than a fork.
- Put a slightly damp folded cloth under a bowl or plate to stop it sliding around the table top.

If you are concerned about eating and have no-one to help you, please ask to see the occupational therapist about adapted cutlery and gadgets to make this easier.

## Extra help:

If you are in anyway concerned that you will not be able to manage your everyday activities and have no-one to help you, you may need a referral to Social Services for help at home. This is a chargeable service.

Social Services can provide assistance with washing and dressing, shopping, laundry and meals (usually from the mobile meals service). They cannot provide help with cleaning/housework.

If you feel you need a referral you will need to alert the nurses at the pre-op assessment clinic or the ward nurses when you are admitted so they can make a referral to the Hospital Social Work Team.

Patients who need Social Services help are not usually suitable for day-case surgery.

## Caring for another person:

If you are a carer for someone else and you will not be able to meet their needs after your shoulder surgery. If this is the case, you will need to make arrangements for their care yourself. The hospital cannot arrange help for anyone who is not a hospital inpatient. If you have no-one to provide this help, you will need to contact Social Services in your local area to organise this prior to your hospital admission.

## Summary:

This leaflet should have provided you with some useful information to help you prepare for managing at home after your shoulder surgery.

If you have further questions please ask your consultant or ward staff when you are admitted. You can ask to see an occupational therapist on the ward if you need further advice.

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**[www.nbt.nhs.uk](http://www.nbt.nhs.uk)**

If you or the individual you are caring for need support reading this leaflet please ask a member of staff for advice.