

Daily life after shoulder surgery

Managing day-to-day with the operated arm resting in a sling — front-opening clothes and one-handed tricks make it easier.

Kieran Hirpara © ⓘ 4.0



For the first few weeks after shoulder surgery your arm lives in a **sling**. Your hand still works (you can grip, write and use a phone), but the arm itself needs to stay supported and at rest. The repair we have done needs time to heal undisturbed, which means the arm must **not actively lift, reach or take weight** until you are cleared. The good news is that almost everything in daily life can still be managed one-handed, with a few tricks and a little planning. This page is the practical companion to our separate guide on wearing a sling (that guide covers how the sling goes on and how long you wear it); this one is about getting through the day.

A bit of honesty up front: most people find the first couple of weeks the hardest, and many need a hand with washing, dressing and a few household tasks at the start. That is completely normal and temporary, and eases steadily as the weeks pass. Lining up some help in advance makes a real difference.

Washing and showering

Good news on washing: your **dressings are waterproof**, so you can shower and let the water splash over them: a normal shower is fine. The rule is **splash, don't scrub or soak**: don't rub at the dressing with a flannel or sponge, and avoid **baths, swimming or holding the shoulder under water**, which can lift the edges and let water track underneath to the wound. Let the water run over it, then **pat** (don't rub) the area dry afterwards. If a dressing peels at the edges or comes loose, leave it and let us know. Many people sit on a shower stool for the first weeks (it lowers the risk of slipping while you are off-balance and one-handed).

You can usually take the sling off to wash, but the principle is to keep the arm still and supported, not to use it. Let it rest against your side or in your lap. If your surgeon has said it is allowed, you can lean your body gently forward and let the arm hang loosely from the shoulder, using gravity rather than your own muscles, so the arm stays completely relaxed. Never actively lift or reach with it to wash.

The armpit on the operated side is the awkward one, because you cannot lift the arm to get into it. The trick is to lean your upper body away from that side and let the arm relax and drift gently outward under its own weight; this opens the armpit enough to clean and dry it with a flannel or wet wipe, and to apply deodorant. Let gravity do the work; do not hitch the shoulder up to make room.

Hair and

back are genuinely hard one-handed. A long-handled sponge helps for the back. For hair, leaning over the basin or asking someone to help for the first week or two is the easy answer; it is not worth a contortion that strains the shoulder. Dry shampoo can bridge a few days if you would rather wait.

Getting dressed

Choose your clothes for the week ahead with the sling in mind:

- **Loose and front-opening.** Button-up or zip-front shirts, cardigans and large-armhole tank tops are far easier than anything snug. Avoid fiddly small buttons and hooks while you are working one-handed.
- **Avoid over-the-head garments.** Tight T-shirts and jumpers that have to go on overhead force the shoulder into exactly the movements we are trying to avoid.
- **Dress the operated arm first, and undress it last.** Feed the resting arm gently into the sleeve before your good arm, and slip the good arm out first when undressing. This keeps the operated shoulder from having to stretch to catch up.
- **Slip-on shoes.** Laces are nearly impossible one-handed; slip-ons or Velcro save a lot of frustration. Elastic laces are a cheap fix for shoes you already own.

Sleeping

Sleep is often the hardest part of the early weeks, and one of the most common frustrations, but it settles steadily as the shoulder calms down. Lying flat lets the arm drift backwards and pulls on the shoulder, so most people sleep far better semi-upright: in a recliner, or propped up on several pillows or a back wedge in bed.

A few things make a real difference:

- **Support the whole arm.** Tuck a pillow under the elbow and forearm so it cannot drag down on the shoulder, and put a pillow at your side so you do not roll onto the operated shoulder in your sleep.
- **Settle the pain first.** Many people take their pain relief about half an hour before bed so it is working by the time they lie down.
- **Mind the strap.** A thin singlet or T-shirt under the sling stops it rubbing or chafing your neck overnight.

Whether you keep the sling on while you sleep, and how long you will be wearing it, is covered in our separate guide on [wearing a sling](#).

Eating, cooking and around the house

Almost all of this is workable with your good hand plus the gripping hand of the operated side; the key is to **slide and steady rather than lift**:

- **Slide** heavy pots, plates and the kettle along the bench instead of carrying them. Fill the kettle to only the level you need so it is lighter.
- A **non-slip mat** under a bowl or chopping board lets one hand do the work of two. Simple one-handed aids (a jar opener, a plate guard, rocker-blade cutlery) are inexpensive and genuinely helpful.
- **Prepare ahead.** Batch-cooking and stocking some easy meals before surgery, and moving everyday items (mug, cereal, medications) to bench-height where you can reach them without stretching, removes a lot of daily hassle.
- **Get help with the heavy and awkward jobs:** full laundry baskets, shopping, changing bedding, anything two-handed and lifted. There is nothing to prove by struggling with these; let the shoulder heal.

Keep the rest of the arm moving

A sling rests the shoulder, not the whole arm. Unless you have been told otherwise, gently and regularly move the parts that are allowed to move:

- **Hand and wrist:** open and close your fingers, and circle the wrist, a few times an hour. This keeps them supple and helps pump away swelling.
- **Elbow:** if your surgeon has said it is allowed, take the arm out of the sling a few times a day and gently straighten and bend the elbow (keeping the shoulder still) so the elbow does not stiffen.
- **Posture:** it is easy to hunch protectively around a slinged arm. Sit tall, draw the shoulder blades gently back now and then, and roll the good shoulder, to ease the neck and upper-back tightness that the sling tends to cause.

These are general principles; **your own movement rules come first.** Every operation has its own dos and don'ts, so if our written instructions or your physiotherapist say something different about your elbow or shoulder, follow that.

When to seek help

Most of recovery is uneventful, but contact us, your GP, or seek urgent care if you notice any of the following:

- **Pain that is increasing and not controlled** by your prescribed painkillers, or that suddenly becomes much worse.
- **Wound problems:** spreading redness, heat, swelling, or fluid or pus leaking from the wound, especially with a fever or feeling unwell.

- **Fingers that go numb, cold, pale or blue, or swell tightly:** this can mean the sling or a dressing is too tight, or circulation is affected. Loosen the sling and seek advice promptly.
- **Calf pain, swelling or redness in a leg, or sudden breathlessness or chest pain:** these can signal a blood clot and need **urgent** medical attention. Call 000 for sudden breathlessness or chest pain.

When in doubt, it is always better to ask. We would far rather hear from you early than have you wait and worry.