WATERFRONT
PRIVATE HOSPITAL

PATIENT INFORMATION · AFTERCARE

Arm Lift (Brachioplasty) Aftercare

Recovery guidelines for arm lift (brachioplasty) surgery. Follow these instructions carefully to ensure proper healing and achieve optimal results. Arm lift removes excess skin and fat from the upper arms with a scar on the inner arm.

Typical recovery: 6 weeks for main recovery, 2 weeks off work · Reviewed 4 July 2026 · Version 1.0

When to get help — your traffic light guide

RED

Call 999 or go to A&E now if you have:

These can be life-threatening. Do not wait to call the hospital first.

- Chest pain or difficulty breathing
- Heavy bleeding that won't stop
- High temperature (over 38°C) with confusion or unusual drowsiness

AMBER

Contact us now — do not wait — if you have:

- Sudden severe pain or swelling in one arm
- Temperature over 38°C
- Signs of infection (spreading redness, pus, or smelly discharge)
- Numbness or colour changes in fingers or hand — loosen your compression garment and call us immediately

Office hours (Mon–Fri 9am–5pm): 0131 376 3785

Evenings and weekends during your early recovery: Out-of-Hours Nurse Advice Line 07405322689 — our nurse can advise you, contact your surgeon, or direct you to NHS services.

After your early recovery period: call the hospital in office hours, or NHS 24 on 111.

Had your surgery at Spire Shawfair Park (overnight stay)? Contact Spire directly using the number on your discharge paperwork — not the Waterfront advice line.

GREEN

Tell us at your next appointment:

Anything else that is niggling or worrying you — no concern is too small. Mention it at your next appointment, or call us during office hours.

Related Information Leaflets

Separate leaflets about the procedure itself — not the aftercare instructions above. Tap a title to download, or find them all on your procedure page in the portal.

- Body Contouring After Weight Loss — Guide (https://waterfront-patient-portal.netlify.app/waterfrontaftercare/body-contouring-after-weight-loss-guide.pdf)

How to Use This Information

The advice below is based on Waterfront Private Hospital's aftercare information adapted for arm lift surgery. It is general guidance for the average patient and may be adapted by your consultant for your individual circumstances.

Arm lift recovery is generally easier than larger surgeries like tummy tuck. The first week is the most uncomfortable - it gets much easier after that. Be patient with your body and don't hesitate to contact us with concerns.

Always follow the specific instructions given to you on the day of your surgery. If there is ever a difference between this guide and your consultant's instructions, follow your consultant's written or verbal instructions and contact us for clarification.

Post-Operative Checklist

- Make sure you have your painkillers — the nurse looking after you will go through them with you
- Dressings applied and comfortable
- Follow-up nurse appointment booked (end of week 1)
- Transport home arranged
- Responsible adult staying with you first night
- Emergency contact numbers saved in phone
- Understand wound care and scar location
- Understand wound care instructions

Wound Care

- You can shower from day 1 (unless your surgeon says otherwise) — pat incisions dry gently, don't submerge them
- Keep surgical areas clean with mild soap and water
- Watch for signs of infection (spreading redness, pus, warmth)
- Do not soak in baths or hot tubs until wounds fully healed (approximately 4 weeks)
- Do not remove dissolvable stitches - they fall out on their own (around 2–3 weeks)
- Tissue glue and steri-strips protect incisions and prevent infection
- If drain present, empty bulb 2-3 times daily and record output

Pain Management

- Take your painkillers as directed on their labels — every medicine you go home with is labelled with its dose and frequency, and your nurse will go through them with you before you leave. Paracetamol and ibuprofen can safely be taken together
- Take prescribed pain medication as directed - don't wait for pain to become severe
- Significant discomfort is expected for first week
- Dihydrocodeine is essential in the first week
- Use cold packs on arms (over garment) for first 48 hours
- Keeping arms elevated helps reduce pain more than medication
- Gentle movement can help with pain after first few days
- Pain improves significantly after first week

Activity Restrictions

- No lifting (even light items) for first 2 weeks
- No lifting above shoulder height for first 3 weeks
- Avoid stretching movements for 4 weeks
- No driving for 1–2 weeks (until off pain medication and can move arms comfortably)
- Return to work: 2 weeks for desk jobs
- No exercise except gentle walking for 6 weeks
- No swimming for 4–6 weeks (or until wounds fully healed)
- Gradually resume normal activities after 6 weeks with surgeon approval

Recovery at a Glance

- **Days 1–3:** Significant pain, heavy arms, maximum swelling — Rest, strong painkillers, arms elevated
- **Days 4–7:** Pain improving, swelling peaks then stabilises — Light movement, keep arms elevated when resting
- **Week 1 (End):** Nurse appointment scheduled — Outer dressings removed
- **Week 2:** Pain decreasing, gentle arm use — Remove paper tape, light activities
- **Weeks 3–4:** Much better, more normal arm movements — Start scar care if wounds dry
- **Week 6:** Nearly normal function, most swelling gone — Can start gentle exercise
- **3 months:** Final shape visible, scars fading — Resume normal activities
- **6 months:** Scars significantly faded — Full recovery complete

Before You Leave the Hospital

- **Painkillers:** Make sure you have your painkillers before you leave — the nurse looking after you will go through them with you.
- **Dressings:** Applied before discharge. Keep arms elevated when possible to reduce swelling.
- **Follow-up appointments:** You will be given a card with details of your first nurse appointment (usually end of week 1) and contact details if you have concerns once you get home.
- **Getting home safely:** You must have someone to take you home and a **responsible adult with you for the first night**.

Understanding Your Arm Lift

During your procedure, we performed:

- Excess skin and fat removed from upper arms
- Arm contour improved and tightened
- Scar placed on inner arm (armpit to elbow)
- Dissolvable stitches with tissue glue and steri-strips
- Drain may be present for fluid management
- Recovery is generally faster than larger body contouring procedures.

Medication Guide

- **Regular Pain Relief**
- **Strong Pain Relief**
- Essential for the first week
- **Bowel Management**
- **Laxatives:** Daily if needed to prevent constipation
- Straining can increase pain and swelling - take preventatively

Compression Sleeves (Optional)

Are Compression Sleeves Required?

Compression sleeves are not required from our hospital's perspective. However, some patients find them helpful for reducing swelling and providing support during the early recovery phases. The decision to wear compression sleeves is yours to make.

If you choose to wear compression sleeves, discuss this with your surgeon during your consultation. Your nurse can advise on fit, comfort, and duration based on your individual recovery.

If You Choose to Wear Compression Sleeves

- **Fit:** Should be snug but not painful or cutting off circulation
- **Coverage:** From shoulder to wrist (full length recommended)
- **Adjustment:** May need to loosen slightly as swelling reduces
- **Washing:** Hand wash daily in cool water, air dry
- **Skin care:** Check skin under sleeve daily for irritation
- **Where to Purchase** — If you decide to get compression sleeves:
- Online: Lipoelastic (https://www.lipoelastic.co.uk) or Macom (https://www.macom-medical.com) (use code QUABA for discount)
- Department stores: M&S, Tesco, Asda
- Pharmacies: Boots or local chemists
- Sports shops: May stock medical-grade compression wear

Understanding Your Scars

Scar Location and Visibility

Your scar runs from your armpit to just above your elbow on the inner arm. This positioning means:

- Hidden when arms are at sides or in normal resting position
- Visible when arms are raised or in sleeveless clothing
- Easily covered by long sleeves, bracelets, or arm sleeves
- Position is a fair trade-off for improved arm contour and reduced sagging
- **Scar Timeline**
- **Weeks 1–2:** Red/dark, raised, may ooze — Normal healing - wound is fresh
- **Weeks 3–4:** Still red/pink, becoming flatter — Scar is strengthening internally
- **Month 3:** Pink/salmon colour, much flatter — Significant fading beginning
- **Months 6–12:** Pale pink to white, thin and flat — Most fading occurs in this period
- **12–18 months:** Final appearance — Scars fade significantly but remain visible in sleeveless clothing
- **Important: Realistic Expectations** — While scars fade dramatically over 12–18 months, they will always be visible in sleeveless clothing or when arms are raised. This is a permanent trade-off for the improvement in arm contour. Most patients feel the results are well worth the visible scar, especially considering the positioning on the inner arm.
- Scar appearance varies based on genetics, age, skin type, and how well you follow scar care instructions.

Scar Care

When to Start — Only start scar care when wounds are completely healed and dissolvable stitches have fallen out or been removed. This is usually around **weeks 3–4**.

Scar Care Routine

- **Step 1: Apply Micropore Tape** — Use 3M micropore tape from any pharmacy; Gently clean scar first with mild soap and pat dry; Apply tape along entire scar length; Leave on for 3–5 days continuously; Can shower with it on (pat dry after); Protects scar from sun and irritation
- **Step 2: Remove and Moisturise** — Gently remove tape after 3–5 days; Use plain moisturiser (E45, Aveeno, Bio-Oil, or similar); Massage gently into scar; Leave scar exposed for 1–2 days; Allows skin to breathe
- **Step 3: Repeat Cycle** — Continue cycling tape (3–5 days) and moisturising (1–2 days); Repeat for 4–6 months total; Can continue longer if scar still appears red/raised; Stop tape if skin becomes irritated - moisturise only; Continue sun protection indefinitely
- **Products for Scar Care**
- **Moisturisers:** E45 cream, Aveeno, Bio-Oil, Bepanthen, or similar
- **Tape:** 3M Micropore tape (available in any pharmacy)
- **Sun Protection:** SPF 50+ on scar for at least 12 months

- **Sunscreen:** Apply daily when scar is exposed
- **Sun Protection is Critical** — Sun exposure darkens scars permanently. Protect your scar from sun for at least 12 months (ideally 18 months) by wearing long sleeves, using SPF 50+ sunscreen, or keeping arms covered when outdoors.

Lifestyle Guidelines

✓ **DO**

- Keep dressings clean and dry as advised
- Keep arms elevated when resting or lying down
- Sleep with 2-3 pillows under arms
- Take painkillers on schedule (don't wait for pain)
- Walk regularly from day 1
- Eat high-fibre foods
- Protect scars from sun (SPF 50+)
- Be patient - recovery progresses steadily
- ✗ **AVOID**
- Lifting anything for first 2 weeks
- Raising arms above shoulder height for 3 weeks
- Stretching arms or reaching movements for 4 weeks
- Smoking or vaping nicotine for at least 4 weeks
- Alcohol for 2 weeks
- Swimming until wounds fully healed (4–6 weeks)
- Heavy exercise or gym for 6 weeks
- Sun exposure on scars for 12+ months

Activity Resume Timeline

- **Showering:** Day 1 (carefully) — Pat dry, don't submerge incisions
- **Arm movements:** Day 1 (gentle only) — Within comfort zone only, no stretching
- **Driving:** Weeks 1–2 — When comfortable with arm movements
- **Office work:** Weeks 1–2 — Light desk work, no heavy lifting
- **Walking exercise:** Day 1 — Encouraged, 10-15 min walks
- **Light cardio:** Week 6 — No arm movements above shoulder
- **Upper body exercise:** Weeks 8–12 — Start gently, build gradually
- **Swimming:** 4–6 weeks — Chlorine can irritate fresh scars

- **Heavy lifting:** 3 months — Over 5kg - build gradually
- **Sleeveless clothing:** Week 6 — Scars visible initially but fading
- **Flying (short):** 2 weeks — Under 3 hours, move regularly

Your Recovery, Stage by Stage

Days 1–3 — Early Recovery

Immediate post-surgery pain, swelling, and heavy arm sensation

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Significant pain and tightness in arms
- Arms feel very heavy and tight
- Severe swelling, especially around elbows
- Bruising on inner arms
- Blood spots on dressings
- Difficulty moving arms
- Mood changes

CARE ROUTINE

- Take strong painkillers on schedule
- Keep arms elevated above heart when resting
- Keep dressings clean and dry
- Sleep with 2-3 pillows under arms
- Do NOT attempt arm movements above shoulder
- Move arms gently only when necessary
- Shower carefully (can shower from day 1)
- Walk around home every 2–3 hours to prevent blood clots

COMFORT

- Take painkillers regularly - don't wait for severe pain
- Use cold packs on arms (over garment) for first 48 hours
- Arms raised position helps reduce pain and swelling
- Report uncontrolled pain immediately

Days 4–7 — Gradual Progress

Pain becoming more manageable, swelling peaks then begins to stabilise

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Pain more manageable but still significant

- Swelling at maximum around days 4–5, then stabilises
- Arms still feel quite heavy
- Gradual improvement in arm comfort
- More energy each day

CARE ROUTINE

- Continue gentle arm exercises as advised
- Keep arms elevated when sitting or lying down
- Continue taking medications regularly
- Very gentle arm movements within comfort zone
- Attend first nurse appointment (usually end of week 1)
- Can shower with dressings on if needed
- Continue gentle walking

COMFORT

- Pain should be more manageable
- Continue strong painkillers as prescribed
- Begin transitioning to regular pain relief by end of week
- Cold therapy less needed by days 5–7
- Elevation helps more than pain medication

Week 2 — Improvement

Pain decreasing, beginning to use arms more, dressings removed

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Pain decreasing significantly
- Able to use arms for light activities
- Bruising fading
- Still quite swollen but visibly improving
- Can return to desk work

CARE ROUTINE

- Remove paper tape by end of week 2 (apply Vaseline if stuck)
- Glue tape stays until week 3 (nurse will remove)
- Follow wound care instructions
- Begin gentle range of motion exercises (within comfort)
- Avoid lifting arms above shoulder height
- Can wash arms and surgical area gently
- Continue elevating arms when resting

COMFORT

- Pain decreasing significantly

- May reduce medication frequency
- Still need painkillers for activity
- Numbness and tingling normal as nerves heal

Weeks 3–4 — Turning Point

Much better, can start scar care, more normal arm movements

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Pain much reduced
- Swelling significantly reducing
- Most bruising gone
- Feeling more human
- Arms feel less heavy

CARE ROUTINE

- Follow nurse guidance on activity levels
- Can moisturise scars if wounds fully dry
- Begin gentle stretching and mobility exercises
- Increase arm movements gradually
- Still avoid heavy lifting or extreme movements
- Can do light activity with arms
- Begin scar care routine

COMFORT

- Minimal pain medication needed
- Most discomfort resolved
- Occasional sharp pains (nerves healing) are normal
- Can manage with regular painkillers as needed

Week 6 — Nearly Normal

Can resume more activities, scars well-healed, clearance for gentle exercise

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Most swelling gone
- Bruising completely resolved
- Nearly normal arm movement
- Feeling much more normal
- Scars visible but healing well

CARE ROUTINE

- Can start gentle exercise with approval

- Continue scar care (tape and moisturising)
- Can wear sleeveless clothing if comfortable
- Resume most normal activities
- Follow-up appointment around week 6
- Continue scar care routine
- Continue sun protection on scars

COMFORT

- No pain medication typically needed
- Occasional mild tightness possible
- Full range of motion nearly restored

Month 3 — Most Swelling Gone

Nearly final results, scars significantly faded, full activities possible

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Almost all swelling gone
- Final shape becoming visible
- Scars significantly faded
- Feeling completely normal
- Arms look and feel natural

CARE ROUTINE

- Resume normal activities
- Heavy lifting now permitted
- Continue sun protection on scars
- Can resume swimming
- Full exercise programme with approval
- Continue scar care routine

COMFORT

- No pain expected
- Full recovery achieved
- Contact team if any concerns arise

Month 6 — Final Result

Optimal healing achieved, final scar appearance

WHAT'S NORMAL

- Final results visible
- Scars well-healed and significantly faded

- Complete return to all activities
- Confident with arm appearance
- Scars continue to fade over next 6 months

CARE ROUTINE

- All activities permitted
- Regular exercise including upper body work
- Continue long-term scar care as advised
- Annual check-ups as recommended
- Scars will continue fading 12–18 months post-op

COMFORT

- No pain expected
- Full recovery achieved
- Contact team if any concerns arise

Follow-Up Appointments

Week 1 (Days 7–10) — First post-operative nurse appointment to check healing and wound progress.

- Outer dressings removed
- Wounds and scars checked
- Paper tape (steri-strips) removed, glue tape left on
- Dissolvable stitches checked
- Drain removed if present
- Questions answered, next steps explained

Further nurse reviews — as needed — Some patients need further nurse reviews. If so, the nurses will arrange these with you and will discharge you from nurse-led care once they are happy your wounds have healed.

Around 6 months — surgeon review (final follow-up) — Your surgeon will usually see you at around 6 months to assess your final result. Your surgeon is always available to review you sooner if required, and in some circumstances may wish to see you before your final follow-up.

Your appointment schedule may vary. Always follow the specific dates and times given in your appointment card. Contact us if you need to reschedule.

Frequently Asked Questions

How visible will my scars be?

The scars run from your armpit to just above your elbow on the inner arm. They're positioned where they're less visible when arms are at rest. Initially scars appear pink/red and firm, but fade significantly over 12–18 months. Wearing long sleeves covers them initially. Most patients find them acceptable trade-off for improved arm contour. Use of scar care products can help minimize appearance.

When can I lift things again?

Avoid all lifting for the first 2 weeks. Keep arms below shoulder height for 3–4 weeks. Light lifting (under 2kg) may resume around weeks 4–5. Normal lifting resumes around weeks 6–8 depending on healing. Heavy lifting (over 10kg) is usually safe by 3 months. Always listen to your body and stop if you feel sharp pain.

Is numbness normal?

Yes, temporary numbness is completely normal. It can affect the upper arm and sometimes the side of the chest. This is from nerve irritation during surgery. Sensation gradually returns over 3–6 months. Some areas may always feel slightly different, which is normal. Tingling and "pins and needles" as sensation returns are also normal.

When can I exercise?

Walking is encouraged from day 1. Light cardio and upper body stretching can start around week 6. Full exercise including strength training usually resumes around weeks 8–12. Your surgeon will give specific clearance at week 6 follow-up. Start gently and progress gradually - don't rush back to intense activity.

Will I need to wear compression sleeves?

Compression sleeves are not required from our perspective but some patients find them helpful for reducing swelling. Discuss this with your surgeon during your consultation. If you do choose to wear compression sleeves, your nurse can advise on fit and duration.

When can I wear short sleeves or go sleeveless?

You can expose your arms to air once dressings are removed (usually weeks 1–2), but many patients feel more comfortable keeping arms covered. By week 6, most patients feel ready for short sleeves. Scars may be visible initially but fade significantly. Use scar care and sun protection. By 3–6 months, most patients feel comfortable going sleeveless.