



OT Rehab & Recovery Guide

Practical Strategies to Support Upper
Limb Recovery & Wellness
By Laura Henderson, Founder &
Occupational Therapist



START YOUR RECOVERY JOURNEY WITH CONFIDENCE

Welcome! I'm Laura Henderson, an Occupational Therapist specialising in upper limb rehab and holistic recovery. I know how challenging recovery can feel—pain, frustration, and uncertainty are part of the journey. But with the right strategies, guidance, and daily habits, recovery is achievable.

This guide is designed to:

- Give practical exercises and routines for upper limb rehab
- Support pain management and wellness
- Help you track progress and stay motivated

Important Safety Notice

This guide provides general rehabilitation strategies and is intended for educational purposes. Every person's recovery journey is unique, and rehabilitation needs vary significantly depending on:

- The nature and severity of your injury or condition
- Your current stage of recovery
- Your individual pain tolerance and physical capabilities
- Any underlying health conditions
- Specific medical advice from your healthcare team

Before starting any exercises or strategies in this guide:

- Consult with your GP, physiotherapist, or occupational therapist
 - Ensure the exercises are appropriate for your specific condition and recovery stage
 - Start at a level suitable for your current abilities—do not compare your progress to others
 - Always listen to your body and respect your pain limits
 - Seek professional guidance if you're unsure about any exercise or experience concerning symptoms

This guide is designed to complement, not replace, professional medical advice and individualised treatment plans.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR RECOVERY JOURNEY



Recovery is a process, not a quick fix. Each person's body responds differently, so patience is key.

Stages of Recovery:

1. Acute Phase: Focus on rest, gentle movement, and reducing inflammation.
2. Rehabilitation Phase: Gradual strength and flexibility exercises, restoring range of motion.
3. Maintenance Phase: Long-term wellness, preventing re-injury, improving function in daily activities.

Psychological Impact:- Recovery can affect mood, confidence, and independence.-
Celebrate small wins to stay motivated.

Practical Tip: Keep a journal to track pain, movement, and daily improvements.

THE ROLE OF MINDSET IN RECOVERY

Your mental approach to recovery is just as important as the physical work. Research shows that individuals with a positive, engaged mindset experience better outcomes and faster progress.

Key Mindset Principles:

- Embrace the Process: Recovery is rarely linear. Expect good days and challenging days—both are part of healing.
- Focus on What You Can Control: You cannot control the timeline, but you can control your consistency, effort, and attitude.
- Reframe "Setbacks" as "Feedback": A difficult day provides information about what your body needs—rest, modification, or a different approach.
- Celebrate Micro-Wins: Notice small improvements—lifting a cup with less pain, typing for an extra five minutes, or completing exercises without skipping a day.
- Practice Self-Compassion: Speak to yourself as you would a friend going through recovery. Avoid harsh self-criticism when progress feels slow.

Cognitive Strategies to Support Recovery:

- Positive Affirmations: Use daily affirmations such as "My body is healing," "I am getting stronger each day," or "I trust the process."
- Gratitude Practice: Each evening, write down three things your affected limb allowed you to do that day, no matter how small.
- Progress Visualisation: Create a mental image of yourself using your hand/arm fully recovered. Visualise specific activities you want to return to.
- Challenge Negative Thoughts: When thoughts like "I'll never get better" arise, counter them with evidence of progress you've already made.

Example: If you're frustrated that you still can't open a jar after three weeks of exercises, reframe: "Three weeks ago, I couldn't even grip the jar. Now I can hold it firmly. I'm building strength progressively, and full function will come with continued practice."

The word "SKILLS" is spelled out in a row of wooden blocks. Each block is light-colored with a black letter. The blocks are arranged in a slightly staggered pattern, with some blocks having a vertical line to their left and others to their right.



UPPER LIMB REHAB: KEY PRINCIPLES

Upper limb rehab focuses on restoring function, strength, and mobility in the hands, wrists, arms, and shoulders.

Core Principles:

1. Consistency: The Foundation of Recovery

Consistency is the most critical factor in successful upper limb rehabilitation. Regular, daily practice creates neuroplastic changes in the brain, strengthening the neural pathways that control movement and function.

Why Consistency Matters:

- Neuroplasticity: The brain adapts and rewires itself through repetition. Daily practice reinforces new movement patterns and helps restore lost function.
- Tissue Adaptation: Muscles, tendons, and ligaments respond better to frequent, moderate stress rather than occasional intense sessions.
- Habit Formation: Doing exercises at the same time each day builds a sustainable routine that becomes automatic.
- Prevents Stiffness: Regular movement prevents joints from becoming stiff and maintains tissue flexibility.

Practical Tips for Consistency:

- Set a specific time each day for exercises (e.g., after breakfast, before lunch)
- Start with just 5 minutes if that's all you can manage—building the habit matters more than duration
- Use reminders on your phone or calendar to prompt you
- Link exercises to existing daily activities (e.g., whilst waiting for the kettle to boil)
- Track your daily completion to visualise your streak and stay motivated

Example: Doing 10 minutes of exercises daily for 7 days is far more beneficial than doing one 70-minute session once a week. The daily practice allows your body to adapt gradually without overwhelming the healing tissues.



PROGRESSIVE LOADING: BUILDING STRENGTH SAFELY

Progressive loading means gradually increasing the demands placed on your muscles, tendons, and joints over time. This principle ensures continuous improvement whilst minimising the risk of re-injury or setbacks.

How Progressive Loading Works:

- **Gradual Resistance:** Start with minimal or no resistance, then slowly add light weights, resistance bands, or theraputty as strength improves.
- **Increased Repetitions:** Begin with 5-10 reps and gradually work up to 15-20 as exercises become easier.
- **Advanced Movements:** Progress from simple movements (e.g., wrist flexion) to more complex functional tasks (e.g., turning a doorknob).
- **Longer Duration:** Extend hold times (e.g., from 2 seconds to 5 seconds) as endurance builds.

Signs You're Ready to Progress:

- Current exercises feel significantly easier
- You can complete all reps without pain or excessive fatigue
- Your pain level during exercises has decreased consistently
- You've maintained your current level for at least 1-2 weeks

Signs You Should Not Progress Yet:

- Exercises still feel challenging or cause moderate discomfort
- Pain levels increase during or after exercises
- You notice swelling or inflammation
- You cannot complete the full set of repetitions with good form

Example Progression:

Week 1-2: Hand squeezes with soft foam ball, 10 reps, 2 times daily

Week 3-4: Hand squeezes with medium-resistance ball, 12 reps, 2 times daily

Week 5-6: Hand squeezes with firm theraputty, 15 reps, 3 times daily

Week 7+: Functional gripping tasks (e.g., carrying shopping bags, opening jars)



RANGE OF MOTION (ROM): MAINTAINING JOINT HEALTH

Range of motion refers to the full movement potential of a joint. After injury or surgery, joints can become stiff due to inflammation, scar tissue formation, or prolonged immobilisation. Maintaining and improving ROM is essential for functional recovery.

Types of Range of Motion:

- Passive ROM: Movement performed by someone else or with your other hand—used in early stages when active movement is difficult or painful.
- Active-Assisted ROM: You initiate the movement, but receive help to complete it—a transitional stage towards full active movement.
- Active ROM: You perform the movement independently without assistance—the goal for most daily activities.

Why ROM Work Matters:

- Prevents joint stiffness and contractures (permanent shortening of muscles/tendons)
- Promotes circulation and reduces swelling
- Maintains cartilage health through movement and lubrication
- Reduces pain associated with stiffness
- Enables functional tasks like reaching, gripping, and lifting

Effective ROM Strategies:

- Perform ROM exercises multiple times throughout the day, even for just 2-3 minutes
- Move slowly and deliberately—never force a joint beyond its comfortable range
- Use warmth (e.g., warm towel, warm water) before ROM exercises to relax tissues
- Breathe deeply and relax during stretches—tension limits movement
- Incorporate ROM movements into daily activities (e.g., reaching for items on shelves)

Example ROM Exercise: Wrist flexion and extension should be performed gently and within a pain-free range. If you can only bend your wrist 20 degrees initially, that's your starting point. With consistent daily practice, you may gradually increase to 30, 40, and eventually 60+ degrees over several weeks.

PAIN AWARENESS: LISTENING TO YOUR BODY

Understanding and responding appropriately to pain is crucial for safe, effective recovery. Not all pain is harmful, but recognising the difference between productive discomfort and harmful pain can prevent setbacks.

The Pain Scale: What Different Levels Mean

- 0-2/10 (Minimal): Safe to exercise. You may feel slight awareness of the area but no true discomfort.
- 3-4/10 (Mild): Acceptable during exercises. This represents therapeutic discomfort—your tissues are working and adapting.
- 5-6/10 (Moderate): Caution zone. You can continue carefully, but monitor closely. If pain increases, stop and rest.
- 7+/10 (Severe): Stop immediately. This level of pain indicates potential harm or overloading of tissues.

Types of Pain:

- Productive Discomfort: Dull, stretching sensation; muscle fatigue; slight ache that subsides within 1-2 hours post-exercise. This is normal and indicates your body is adapting.
- Warning Pain: Sharp, stabbing, or burning sensations; pain that persists or worsens after exercise; pain accompanied by swelling, heat, or redness. This requires immediate attention.





THE 24-HOUR RULE:

After exercising, monitor your pain levels for 24 hours. If pain or stiffness significantly increases and doesn't settle within this timeframe, you may have overdone it. Reduce intensity or volume in your next session.

When to Stop and Seek Help:

- Sharp, sudden pain during movement
- Significant swelling or visible inflammation
- Numbness, tingling, or loss of sensation
- Pain that disrupts sleep or daily activities
- Any feeling of joint instability or "giving way"
- Symptoms that persist or worsen despite rest

PAIN MANAGEMENT DURING EXERCISES

Start within a comfortable range and gradually explore your limits

Modify exercises if pain exceeds 4/10—reduce reps, resistance, or range

Take short breaks between sets to allow tissues to recover

Use pain as feedback, not a barrier—it guides your progression

Keep a pain diary to identify patterns and triggers

Example: If wrist extension causes 5/10 pain at full range, reduce the range by 50% and work within a comfortable zone. Over days and weeks, gradually extend further as pain decreases. This approach respects your body's healing timeline whilst still promoting progress.



INTEGRATING ALL FOUR PRINCIPLES



These principles work together synergistically:

- Consistency ensures regular stimulus for adaptation
- Progressive loading builds strength without overwhelming tissues
- ROM work maintains flexibility and function
- Pain awareness keeps you safe and guides decision-making

By understanding and applying these principles thoughtfully, you create a solid foundation for successful, sustainable recovery.

Examples of Rehab Exercises:

1. Wrist Flexion & Extension: Gently bend wrist up and down 10–15 reps.
2. Finger Extensions with Rubber Band: Strengthens finger extensors, 10 reps.
3. Shoulder Pendulum Swings: Lean forward and let the arm swing in circles.

DAILY MOVEMENT & EXERCISE TIPS

A structured daily routine supports recovery and prevents stiffness.

Sample Routine:

- Morning: 5-minute warm-up (arm circles, shoulder shrugs)
- Midday: 10–15 min guided OT exercises (hand squeezes, wrist stretches)
- Evening: 5–10 min cool-down & relaxation (gentle stretching, deep breathing)

Tips for Success:

- Start slow and build gradually
- Perform exercises in front of a mirror to monitor form
- Adjust intensity based on pain levels





PAIN MANAGEMENT & SELF-CARE

Managing pain and preventing burnout is crucial.

Self-Care Strategies:

- Cold/Heat Therapy: Ice for inflammation, heat for stiffness
- Mindfulness & Breathing: Reduces stress and muscle tension
- Ergonomic Adjustments: Proper desk setup, posture correction
- Sleep & Hydration: Supports healing at a cellular level

Additional Self-Care Strategies:

- Gentle Massage: Use your unaffected hand or ask a family member to gently massage the affected area to improve circulation and reduce muscle tension.
- Compression Therapy: Wear compression sleeves or gloves (as advised by your OT) to reduce swelling and provide support during activities.
- Elevation: When resting, elevate your arm above heart level using pillows to reduce swelling and promote drainage.
- Activity Pacing: Break tasks into smaller chunks with regular rest breaks to avoid overuse and fatigue.
- Stress Management Techniques: Practice progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, or gentle yoga to reduce overall body tension.
- Nutrition for Healing: Eat anti-inflammatory foods (e.g., leafy greens, fatty fish, berries) and ensure adequate protein intake to support tissue repair.
- Epsom Salt Baths: Soak your affected limb in warm water with Epsom salts to relax muscles and ease discomfort.
- Distraction Techniques: Engage in hobbies or activities you enjoy (audiobooks, podcasts, gentle crafts) to take your mind off pain.
- Social Connection: Stay connected with friends and family—emotional support is vital for recovery and mental wellbeing.
- Professional Support: Don't hesitate to reach out to your GP, physiotherapist, or occupational therapist if pain persists or worsens.

Warning Signs: Stop exercise and consult a professional if:

- Sharp, sudden pain
- Swelling or redness
- Numbness or tingling

GOAL SETTING & MOTIVATION

Recovery is easier when you have measurable, achievable goals.

How to Set Goals:

- Specific: "Improve wrist extension by 10 degrees in 4 weeks."
- Measurable: Track exercises and improvements daily.
- Realistic: Avoid overloading the injured area.
- Time-Bound: Set weekly or monthly milestones.

Goal Setting Examples:

Example 1: Short-term goal (1-2 weeks)

"I will perform wrist flexion and extension exercises twice daily for 10 repetitions, aiming to increase my range of motion by 5 degrees by the end of week 2."

Example 2: Medium-term goal (4-6 weeks)

"I will build up my grip strength so that I can comfortably open jars and carry a shopping bag weighing up to 2kg without pain by week 6."

Example 3: Long-term goal (3 months)

"I will regain full functional use of my hand and wrist to return to my hobbies, including gardening and cooking, with minimal discomfort within 3 months."

Example 4: Activity-based goal

"I will be able to type on my computer for 30 minutes continuously without needing a break due to wrist pain within 4 weeks."

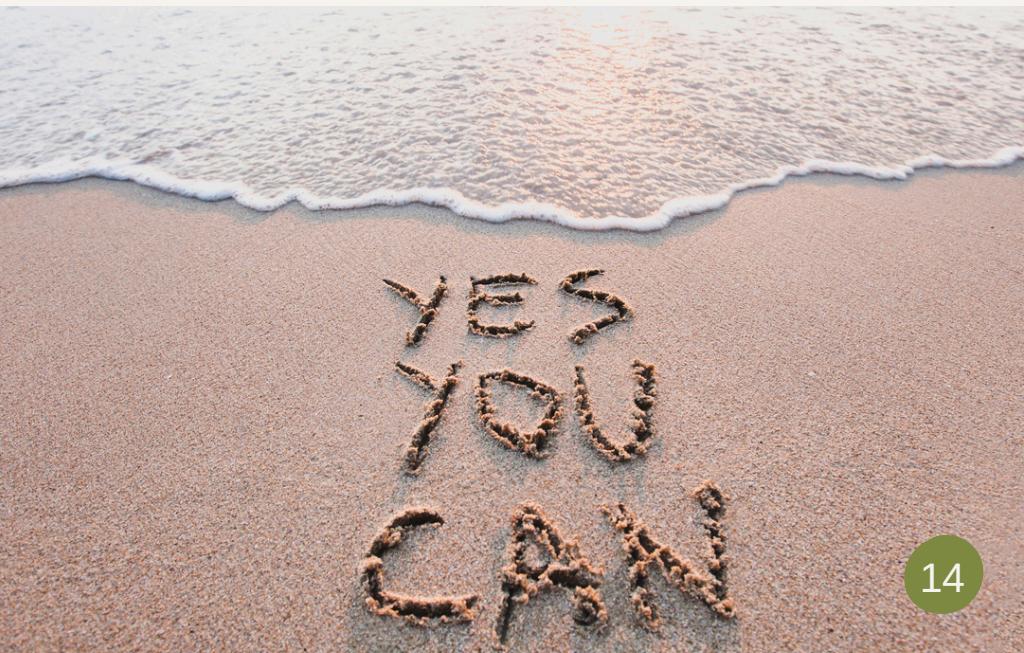
Example 5: Pain management goal

"I will reduce my baseline pain level from 6/10 to 3/10 through consistent daily exercises, heat therapy, and proper ergonomic adjustments over the next 6 weeks."



MOTIVATION TIPS:

- Create a reward system: Treat yourself after completing a week of consistent exercises—watch a favourite film, enjoy a special meal, or take a relaxing bath.
 - Visualise your success: Spend a few moments each day imagining yourself using your hand/arm pain-free in everyday activities.
 - Start with micro-habits: Even 2-3 minutes of exercise daily builds momentum and confidence.
- Find an accountability partner: Share your goals with a friend or family member who can check in on your progress and offer encouragement.
- Reframe setbacks as learning opportunities: A difficult day doesn't erase your progress—it's a chance to adjust your approach and try again.
- Keep a "wins" list: Write down every small achievement, no matter how minor it seems. On tough days, revisit this list for a boost.
- Use visual reminders: Place sticky notes with motivational quotes or your goals in visible places—on your mirror, fridge, or exercise space.
- Mix up your routine: If exercises feel repetitive, try doing them in different locations or at different times of day to keep things fresh.
- Connect with others: Join online support groups or forums where people share their recovery journeys—you'll find inspiration and practical tips.
- Remember your "why": Regularly remind yourself why you started—whether it's returning to a beloved hobby, playing with grandchildren, or regaining independence.





TRACKING PROGRESS

Tracking your recovery helps identify patterns and adjust exercises.

Sample Tracking Sheet:

REFLECTIVE PROMPTS SHEET



Use these prompts daily or weekly to reflect on your recovery journey and identify areas of progress or challenge.

Daily Reflection Prompts

- What exercises felt easiest today?
- Did I notice improvements in daily activities (e.g., opening jars, brushing hair, lifting objects)?
- Any discomfort or pain to address tomorrow?
- How did my energy levels feel during exercises?
- Did I experience any sharp pain or warning signs?
- What motivated me to complete my exercises today?
- Did I need to modify any exercises? If so, why?

Weekly Reflection Prompts

- What progress have I made this week compared to last week?
- Which exercises have become easier or more challenging?
- Have I noticed any changes in my range of motion or strength?
- What goals did I achieve this week?
- What barriers did I face, and how can I overcome them next week?
- How has my pain level changed over the course of the week?
- Am I giving myself enough rest between sessions?
- What small win can I celebrate from this week?

REFLECTIVE PROMPTS SHEET



Monthly Reflection Prompts

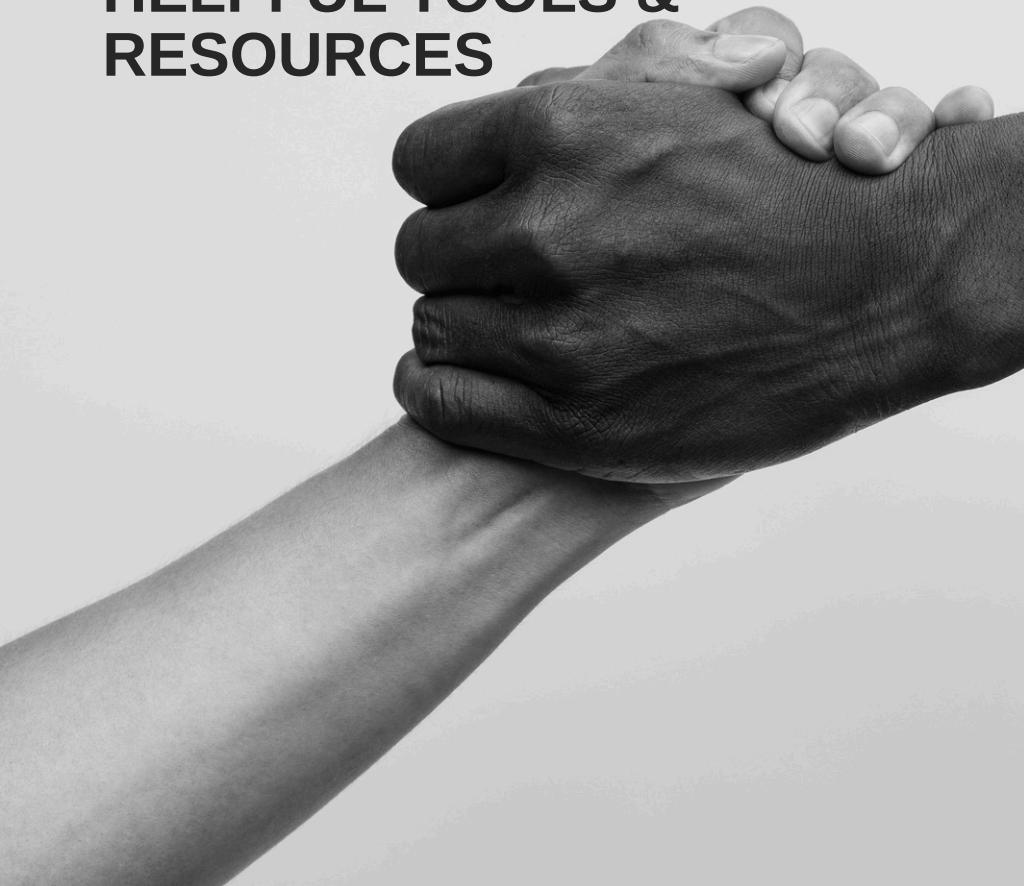
- What significant improvements have I noticed this month?
- How have my daily activities become easier or more functional?
- What new goals should I set for next month?
- Have I been consistent with my exercise routine? If not, what can I change?
- How has my mindset towards recovery evolved?
- What resources or support have been most helpful?
- Am I ready to progress to more challenging exercises?

Emotional Wellbeing Prompts

- How am I feeling emotionally about my recovery today?
- Have I felt frustrated, discouraged, or hopeful this week?
- What self-care activities have helped me manage stress?
- Who can I reach out to for support when I feel overwhelmed?
- What positive affirmation can I tell myself today?

Tip: Keep your reflections in a journal or use the tracking sheet above to record your thoughts alongside your physical progress.

HELPFUL TOOLS & RESOURCES



Recommended Tools:

- Resistance bands, theraputty, hand exercisers
- Splints or wrist supports if advised by your OT
- Foam rollers for shoulder relief

Online Resources:

- Videos demonstrating proper OT exercises
- Apps for tracking exercises and pain
- Online OT communities for support

EXERCISE REFERENCE SHEETS



Printable Exercise Sheet 1: Finger & Hand Strengthening

Exercise Name: Finger Extensions with Rubber Band

Purpose: Strengthen finger extensors and improve hand dexterity

Equipment: Light resistance rubber band

Instructions:

1. Place rubber band around all fingertips and thumb
2. Spread fingers apart against resistance
3. Hold for 2-3 seconds
4. Return to starting position slowly

Repetitions: 10 reps, 2-3 times daily

Pain Level Today (0-10): _____

Notes: _____

Exercise Name: Hand Squeezes

Purpose: Strengthen grip and hand muscles

Equipment: Soft ball, theraputty, or foam stress ball

Instructions:

1. Hold ball in hand with forearm supported
2. Squeeze firmly but gently
3. Hold for 3-5 seconds
4. Release slowly

Repetitions: 10-15 reps, 2-3 times daily

Pain Level Today (0-10): _____

Notes: _____

EXERCISE REFERENCE SHEETS



Printable Exercise Sheet 2: Wrist Mobility

Exercise Name: Wrist Flexion & Extension

Purpose: Improve wrist range of motion and flexibility

Equipment: Table or flat surface

Instructions:

1. Sit with forearm resting on table, palm down
2. Slowly bend wrist upwards (extension) towards ceiling
3. Hold for 2-3 seconds
4. Slowly bend wrist downwards (flexion) towards floor
5. Hold for 2-3 seconds

Repetitions: 10-15 reps, 2-3 times daily

Pain Level Today (0-10): _____

Notes: _____

Exercise Name: Wrist Circles

Purpose: Increase wrist mobility in all directions

Equipment: None

Instructions:

1. Extend arm in front of you
2. Make slow circles with your hand
3. Complete 5 circles clockwise
4. Complete 5 circles anticlockwise

Repetitions: 5 circles each direction, 2-3 times daily

Pain Level Today (0-10): _____

Notes: _____

EXERCISE REFERENCE SHEETS



Printable Exercise Sheet 3: Shoulder Mobility

Exercise Name: Shoulder Pendulum Swings

Purpose: Maintain shoulder mobility without strain

Equipment: Table or chair for support

Instructions:

1. Stand and lean forwards slightly
2. Support yourself with unaffected arm on table
3. Let affected arm hang down naturally
4. Swing arm gently in small circles (clockwise, then anticlockwise)
5. Swing forwards and backwards
6. Swing side to side

Duration: 30-60 seconds each direction, 2-3 times daily

Pain Level Today (0-10): _____

Notes: _____

Exercise Name: Shoulder Shrugs

Purpose: Release shoulder tension and improve mobility

Equipment: None

Instructions:

1. Sit or stand with arms relaxed at sides
2. Lift both shoulders up towards ears
3. Hold for 2-3 seconds
4. Release shoulders down slowly

Repetitions: 10 reps, 2-3 times daily

Pain Level Today (0-10): _____

Notes: _____

EXERCISE REFERENCE SHEETS



Printable Exercise Sheet 4: Daily Stretching Routine

Morning Warm-Up (5 minutes)

Exercise	Duration/Reps	✓ Completed
Arm Circles	10 circles each direction	
Shoulder Shrugs	10 reps	
Wrist Circles	5 circles each direction	
Finger Stretches	10 reps	

Midday Exercise Session (10-15 minutes)

Exercise	Duration/Reps	✓ Completed
Hand Squeezes	10-15 reps	
Wrist Flexion & Extension	10-15 reps	
Finger Extensions	10 reps	
Shoulder Pendulum Swings	60 seconds	

Midday Exercise Session (10-15 minutes)

Exercise	Duration/Reps	✓ Completed
Gentle Wrist Stretches	30 seconds each direction	
Shoulder Relaxation	5 reps	
Deep Breathing	2-3 minutes	
Hand Massage	2-3 minutes	

EXERCISE REFERENCE SHEETS



Daily Reflection:

How did I feel during today's exercises?

What improvements did I notice?

Any pain or discomfort to note?

 Tip: Print these sheets and keep them visible in your exercise space. Tick off each exercise as you complete it to build consistency and track your daily progress!

CONTACT & SUPPORT



Your recovery journey doesn't have to be alone:

If you need personalised guidance, have questions about your recovery, or would like to book a consultation, our team of Occupational Therapy specialists is here to help.

Get in Touch:

- Email: OTrehabandrecovery@outlook.com
- Website: www.otrehabandrecovery.co.uk
- Phone: Available on our website for booking consultations

What We Offer:

- One-to-one assessments
- Personalised rehabilitation and exercise programmes tailored to your needs
- Advice on adaptive equipment and ergonomic adjustments
- Ongoing support throughout your recovery journey

Whether you're just starting your recovery or looking to progress further, our specialists can provide expert guidance to help you achieve your goals safely and effectively.

Every small step in your recovery adds up. Keep going—you've got this!



VISUAL EXERCISE GUIDES

Below are detailed descriptions to help you visualise and perform each exercise correctly. These can be paired with illustrations or photographs.

1. Wrist Flexion & Extension

Starting Position: Sit comfortably with your forearm resting on a table, palm facing down.

Movement:

- Slowly bend your wrist upwards (extension), lifting your hand towards the ceiling
- Hold for 2-3 seconds
- Slowly bend your wrist downwards (flexion), moving your hand towards the floor
- Hold for 2-3 seconds

Repetitions: 10-15 reps, 2-3 times daily

Key Points: Keep your forearm flat on the table. Move slowly and controlled. Stop if you feel sharp pain.



VISUAL EXERCISE GUIDES

2. Finger Extensions with Rubber Band

Starting Position: Place a rubber band around all five fingertips and your thumb.

Movement:

- Spread your fingers apart against the resistance of the band
- Hold the stretched position for 2-3 seconds
- Slowly return fingers together

Repetitions: 10 reps, 2-3 times daily

Key Points: Use a light resistance band to start. Focus on controlled movements. This exercise strengthens the finger extensors.



VISUAL EXERCISE GUIDES

3. Shoulder Pendulum Swings

Starting Position: Stand and lean forwards slightly, supporting yourself with your unaffected arm on a table or chair.

Movement:

- Let your affected arm hang down naturally
- Gently swing your arm in small circles (clockwise, then anticlockwise)
- Then swing forwards and backwards
- Finally, swing side to side

Duration: 30-60 seconds in each direction, 2-3 times daily

Key Points: Let gravity do the work—don't force the movement. Keep circles small initially. This exercise helps maintain shoulder mobility without strain.



VISUAL EXERCISE GUIDES

4. Hand Squeezes

Starting Position: Sit comfortably with your forearm supported.

Movement:

- Hold a soft ball, theraputty, or foam stress ball in your hand
- Squeeze firmly but gently
- Hold for 3-5 seconds
- Slowly release

Repetitions: 10-15 reps, 2-3 times daily

Key Points: Start with soft resistance. Gradually progress to firmer materials. This strengthens grip and hand muscles.