

This guide explains what to expect after your distal biceps tendon repair with Dr Mark Robinson — from leaving hospital, to caring for your elbow at home, to the exercises that will help you get your movement and strength back. Please keep it handy and bring it to your appointments.

Everyone recovers at their own pace. Your surgeon and physiotherapist will tailor the timeframes to your surgery and your progress, so please don't move on to a new stage of exercises until your physiotherapist advises.

ABOUT YOUR SURGERY

Your **biceps** muscle runs down the front of your upper arm. At the elbow, it attaches to the forearm bone (the **radius**) by a strong tendon, called the **distal biceps tendon** to the radial tuberosity. The biceps tendon flexes your elbow and rotates/supinates your forearm (turns your palm up).

This tendon can tear away from the bone, usually during a sudden heavy lift or when the elbow is forced straight against resistance. Typical scenarios include catching or lifting a heavy object that suddenly drops or shifts (furniture, a box, a falling load), a sudden jerk while carrying weight, and weightlifting or manual labour. Without a repair, the arm often loses strength when bending the elbow and turning the palm up, for example when using a screwdriver or lifting.

In a **distal biceps repair**, the tendon is reattached to the bone through an incision at the front of the elbow, using strong anchors or a small button. It takes several months for the tendon to heal firmly to the bone, so your arm is protected in a sling at first, and strength is rebuilt gradually. Full strength can take **6 months to a year** to return.

Some numbness or tingling on the thumb side of the forearm is common after this surgery. It usually improves over the following weeks to months.

BEFORE YOUR SURGERY

Diet / Vitamin C

In the weeks before and after your operation, Dr Robinson encourages you to eat a healthy, balanced diet rich in protein, vitamins and minerals. Include plenty of lean meat, fish, eggs, dairy, legumes, wholegrains, fruit and vegetables, and keep well hydrated.

Dr Robinson recommends taking 1000–1500 mg of vitamin C daily, starting 2 days before your surgery and continuing for 6 weeks afterwards. Vitamin C supports the body's natural healing processes, including the repair of bone, skin and soft tissue. Vitamin C supplements are available from your local pharmacy or supermarket.

No Smoking

Smoking significantly slows healing and increases the risk of complications, including wound infection, delayed bone healing and problems with anaesthesia. We strongly recommend that you stop smoking before your surgery and avoid smoking throughout your recovery. This includes cigarettes, vapes and other nicotine products. If you would like support to quit, speak with your GP or contact Quitline on 13 78 48.

GOING HOME

Discharge

You will go home on the same day as your surgery.

Wound, Dressings & Showering

You will go home with a dressing and tubigrip over your elbow wound. You can remove the tubigrip if you have swelling that occurs in the hand. Leave the dressing in place until your 3-week review, when we will remove it. The dressings are water resistant, not waterproof, so showering is fine but please try to keep them mostly dry until your post-op appointment.

Swelling / Ice

Swelling of the elbow and forearm is normal and should gradually settle over 1–2 weeks. Regular icing helps with both pain and swelling:

- Apply ice 3–5 times a day, for 20 minutes at a time.
- This may be applied with the elbow straight
- Moving your fingers and wrist regularly also helps reduce swelling in your hand.

Pain Relief & Medications (allergies permitting)

Your anaesthetist will prescribe a range of pain medications for you to take home. Please take them as prescribed. In general:

- Take **paracetamol** regularly.
- Add **anti-inflammatories** if they have been prescribed for you.
- Use **stronger pain relief** (such as paxia/tapentadol) as a top-up when needed.

Stop these medications as soon as your pain allows.

Vitamin C

Dr Robinson recommends taking Vitamin C 1000–1500 mg daily for at least 6 weeks after surgery.

YOUR FOLLOW-UP APPOINTMENTS

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
3 weeks	Your first post-op clinic review. A nurse will remove your dressing and check your wound.
3 months	Review with Dr Robinson to see how you are progressing, if required.

You will also see your physiotherapist regularly throughout your recovery.

KEY PRECAUTIONS — FIRST 6 WEEKS

- **Sling:** wear your sling for 4 weeks unless advised otherwise. You may take it off when sitting comfortably in a chair, using a computer, eating, showering and dressing, and doing your exercises.
- **No sudden straightening:** avoid sudden or forceful straightening of your elbow, such as catching a falling object or being pulled by a dog on a lead.
- **No lifting:** don't lift, carry or pull anything with your operated arm until your physiotherapist starts light weights (usually from 4 weeks).
- **Don't force it:** let pain guide you and stop any exercise that is painful.

When to contact us

Please contact our clinic straight away, or see your local doctor, if you notice:

- Redness, warmth or discharge around the wound
- A fever, or feeling generally unwell, Swelling that is getting worse rather than better
- Pain that keeps increasing or isn't controlled by your medications
- A sudden pop, pain or loss of strength in your elbow, or a change in the shape of your biceps muscle
- Weakness in your hand or fingers, or numbness that is spreading or getting worse

Phone (07) 5346 8000 · Email admin@balanceortho.com.au

After hours: go to your nearest urgent care clinic or hospital emergency department.

RETURNING TO WORK, DRIVING & ACTIVITIES

Work

A reasonable goal for returning to office or desk work is 1–2 weeks, starting with light typing once you are comfortable. You can come out of the sling while seated at your desk. For more physically demanding jobs, the usual target is 4–6 weeks for suitable duties and 5–6 months for full duties.

Driving

Driving can usually be resumed at around 4–6 weeks, once you are out of the sling and feel confident controlling the vehicle. Please check with your surgeon first. Your car insurance may not cover you if you are involved in an accident before this time.

Return to Activities

These timeframes are a general guide. Please check with your surgeon or physiotherapist before starting an activity.

ACTIVITY	EXPECTED TIMEFRAME	NOTES
Desk / computer work	1–2 weeks	Light typing once comfortable; sling off while seated at your desk
Gym – lower body	From 2–4 weeks	No arm exercises until the strengthening phase
Driving	4–6 weeks	Once out of the sling and in control of the vehicle; confirm with your surgeon
Running	6 weeks	
Swimming	8–12 weeks	Gentle, once your active movement is comfortable
Gardening / light lifting	12 weeks	Build up gradually within comfort; avoid forceful lifting with your biceps before 12 weeks
Gym – arms / upper body	12 weeks (light) → 6 months (advanced)	Progressive loading guided by your strength and comfort
Physically demanding work	4–6 weeks (suitable duties) 5–6 months (full duties)	On limited duties at first; discuss your job with your surgeon
Golf	4–6 months	Graduated return, guided by your physiotherapist
Heavy lifting / manual labour	4–6 months	Full strength may take 6 months to 1 year to return
Contact & racquet sports	4–6 months	Graduated return; individual advice needed
Waterskiing, wakeboarding, rock climbing	~ 9 months	These involve sudden, forceful elbow straightening

YOUR RECOVERY AT A GLANCE

WHEN	GOALS	WHAT YOU'LL BE DOING
Phase 1 Day 1 – 2 weeks Protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wound healing Settle pain and swelling Gentle movement without strain on the repair 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sling on, except for exercises Ice and pain relief as directed Stage 1 exercises, starting the day after surgery

WHEN	GOALS	WHAT YOU'LL BE DOING
Phase 2 2 – 4 weeks Assisted movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep swelling under control Work towards full movement of the elbow and forearm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sling on, except for exercises Add Stage 2 exercises: bending the elbow and turning the palm, with help from your other arm Keep doing Stage 1 exercises
Phase 3 4 – 12 weeks Active movement & strengthening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Out of the sling Full active movement Begin light strengthening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stage 3 exercises: moving the elbow and forearm on their own Light weights for bending and straightening the elbow, as guided by your physiotherapist: about 1 kg from 4–6 weeks, 2 kg from 6–8 weeks, 3 kg from 8–10 weeks and 4 kg from 10–12 weeks Still avoid sudden straightening of the elbow
Phase 4 3 – 6 months Advanced strengthening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build towards full strength Return to work and sport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progressive strengthening for the biceps and surrounding muscles Work- or sport-specific training Return to heavy lifting is guided by strength testing, not just time Full strength may take 6 months to 1 year

Your rehabilitation may be faster or more cautious depending on your repair. Exact exercises, weights and repetitions will be tailored to you by your physiotherapist.

YOUR EXERCISE PROGRAM

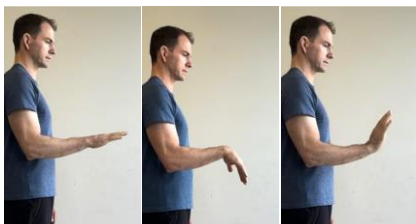
Let pain be your guide, and don't continue any exercise that hurts. These exercises are a general guide, and your physiotherapist may give you a more specific program. Gradually work on increasing your range of movement as you are able.

Early exercises — start the day after surgery

- Take your sling off to do these exercises (except where shown).
- Repeat each exercise **10 times** per session.
- Aim for **3–5 sessions a day**.

1. Wrist bends (flexion & extension) [▶ Watch the video](#)

- Hold your arm out with your wrist straight and palm facing down.
- Bend your hand up towards the ceiling, then let it drop down towards the floor.
- For a more advanced stretch, use your other hand to gently pull your wrist back by your fingers, holding for 10–30 seconds.
- Wrist bends improve flexibility and help reduce scar tissue.



2. Elbow straightening, lying down [▶ Watch the video](#)

- Lie comfortably on your back with your operated arm bent and your elbow pointing up at the ceiling.
- Gently straighten your arm, raising your hand towards the ceiling.
- Slowly let your hand lower back down towards your pillow.



3. Assisted forearm turning (in the sling)

- Keep your operated arm in the sling and clasp your hands together.
- Use your good arm to gently turn the palm of your operated arm up, then down.
- Repeat for 3 sets of 10.

4. Active assisted shoulder flexion [▶ Watch the video](#)

- Lying, sitting or standing, hold the hand of your operated arm with your other hand, in front of your chest.
- Using your good arm to do the work, slowly raise both hands towards the ceiling.
- Gently bring your hands back down to the starting position.
- Once confident, lower your hands behind your head for an extra stretch.

Stage 1 — lying down



Stage 2 — sitting or standing (once comfortable)



Stage 3 — hands behind your head (once comfortable)



From 2 weeks

- Add these exercises when your physiotherapist advises, usually from 2 weeks.
- Continue with the previous exercises.
- Your other arm does the work, so the repaired tendon is not strained.

5. Assisted elbow bending [▶ Watch the video](#)

- Sit or stand comfortably with your operated arm straight by your side.
- Use your good arm to support and lift your operated arm.
- Slowly bend your elbow up towards your shoulder, then lower it back down, using your good arm for support the whole time.
- May progress to active flexion and extension of the elbow when pain allows



6. Forearm turning (supination & pronation) [▶ Watch the video](#)

- Stand or sit with your elbow by your side, bent to 90°, and your palm facing down.
- Turn your palm to face up, then back down.
- If you prefer, sit with the back of your hand resting on your thigh, and turn your palm up and down while keeping your forearm on your thigh.



From 4 weeks

- Start these once you are out of the sling and your physiotherapist advises, usually from 4 weeks.
- Repeat each exercise **10 times, 3 times a day**.
- Your physiotherapist will add light weights gradually.

7. Elbow flexion over fulcrum (opposite arm)

- Place the opposite arm behind the upper arm
- Take a 1kg weight and actively extend and flex the elbow
- 1 kg from 4–6 weeks, 2 kg from 6–8 weeks, 3 kg from 8–10 weeks and 4 kg from 10–12 weeks

8. Triceps Elbow Extension & flexion

- Lay on your back
- Point your elbow directly at the ceiling
- Take a 1kg weight and actively extend and flex the elbow (keeping your elbow pointing at the ceiling)
- 1 kg from 4–6 weeks, 2 kg from 6–8 weeks, 3 kg from 8–10 weeks and 4 kg from 10–12 weeks

Watch the exercises on YouTube

Most exercises in this guide are demonstrated in a short video on our YouTube channel. Tap
“▶ Watch the video” next to an exercise or scan the QR code to see all of our videos.

youtube.com/@BalanceOrthopaedics



This guide has been developed with reference to published post-operative rehabilitation guidelines for distal biceps tendon repair. It is a general guide only and does not replace individual assessment and advice from your surgeon and physiotherapist.