

A GUIDE TO REDUCING PAIN AFTER BREAST CANCER TREATMENT

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IS PAIN HOLDING YOU BACK FROM DOING WHAT YOU LOVE TO DO?

Adjusting to life after breast cancer is an individual journey, and the path to recovery looks very different for each person. Many patients are surprised and discouraged by the lasting side effects of surgery and radiation therapy. They don't realize that solutions other than pain medication can provide relief from the skin tightness and pain they experience when performing simple tasks.

The good news is, there are things you can do -- actions you can take -- to feel better.

As a massage therapist specializing in scar tissue and lymph drainage therapy, I understand a lot of the issues that can occur following breast cancer treatment. I've developed this guide to provide ideas and suggestions, things you can do to heal and feel better after breast cancer.

If you have been feeling hopeless, thinking, "This is my new normal," or "I just have to learn to cope with my new body," then this guide is for you.

My goal is to help you make significant gains in your recovery after treatment ends. It's not comprehensive, but in it, I highlight some of the most common topics addressed by manual therapy and physical therapy rehab.

I hope this information inspires you to take ACTION in your healing process.

ABOUT ME

I'm a massage therapist who helps people heal from injuries, surgeries and chronic pain. In 2008, a client came to me with neck and shoulder pain after a double mastectomy and radiation therapy. She told me she found the scars to be an upsetting reminder of her cancer history.

Hearing her story was profound. Physically, it was evident to both of us that the scar tissue was the root of her neck and shoulder pain. I had to be careful with her delicate skin and a compromised lymph system. Emotionally, I was the first therapist she allowed to see and work on her scars. This was vulnerable ground for both of us.

As a result of this experience, I have dedicated myself to learning about breast cancer recovery and how massage therapy can help. I've been on a path to help cancer survivors get out of pain and live a fuller life after cancer treatment.

I have pursued additional skills and training in the oncology rehab field, and I have experience with a wide range of tissue traumas:

- Joint replacements, tendon and bone repairs
- Lipoma and cyst removals
- Hysterectomies and C-sections
- Tummy tucks, liposuction and breast reductions
- Knife and gunshot wounds, dog bites and horse kick injuries
- Rib and head injuries
- Melanoma and liver tumor removals
- Chest tubes and drain scars
- Skin graft and biopsy sites
- And many other injuries and surgeries

If you're still struggling with
PAIN, MOVEMENT ISSUES & SWELLING ,
let's talk about how
you can start feeling better!

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POST SURGICAL SCAR TISSUE

Almost every form of breast cancer treatment will involve some type of surgery:

- Lumpectomy
- Mastectomy
- Axillary Dissection or Sentinel Lymph Node Biopsy
- Surgical Drains & Ports
- Breast Reconstruction, Flaps and Donor Site

The binding down of tissue under the scar can have a significant effect on the blood, lymph and nerve pathways; create pain and aching; create stiffness and pulling; decrease strength, flexibility and function of muscles and joints.

The local area of the scar is not just superficial and limited to the outer appearance. Scars can have intense emotional and psychological effects that can lead to self image issues, a sense of hopelessness and depression.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF SCAR TISSUE & ADHESIONS?

- Pain or stiffness in the chest, shoulder, armpit, neck, torso, back?
- Tightness in your armpit and chest with your arms over your head?
- Pulling sensations your armpit coming from the lymph node biopsy scar?
- Pain or odd sensation left by the drain tube scar?
- Numbness or nerve sensations when you touch the scar?
- Muscle spasms or muscle weakness?
- Worried about how the scar looks?



LYMPHEDEMA

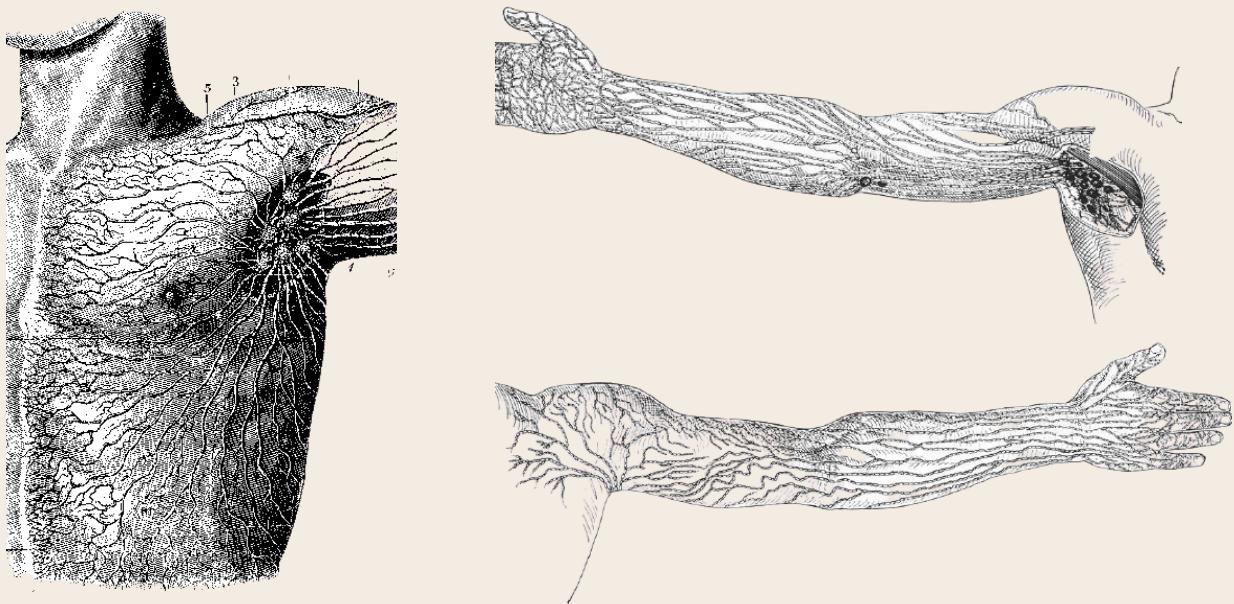
The removal of lymph nodes and radiation treatment can damage and create disruption to lymphatic pathways. Fluid can build up and cause chronic swelling in the hand, arm, shoulder, breast, chest or middle of your body.

Lymphedema can develop suddenly or gradually. It can happen soon after surgery or can develop months or years later. You may feel the signs of lymphedema before you can see them. It's important to recognize the early symptoms and seek medical advice as soon as possible.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF LYMPHEDEMA?

- Fingers, hand or arm feeling stiff, puffy or heavy?
- Losing flexibility in your arm, hand, or fingers?
- Jewelry difficult to get on or off?
- Breast or torso feeling swollen?
- Feeling heavy, aching, or pain on the side of your surgery?
- Skin staying indented after being pressed?

The picture represents the "watershed" of lymph vessels connecting and flowing toward the lymph nodes in the axilla.

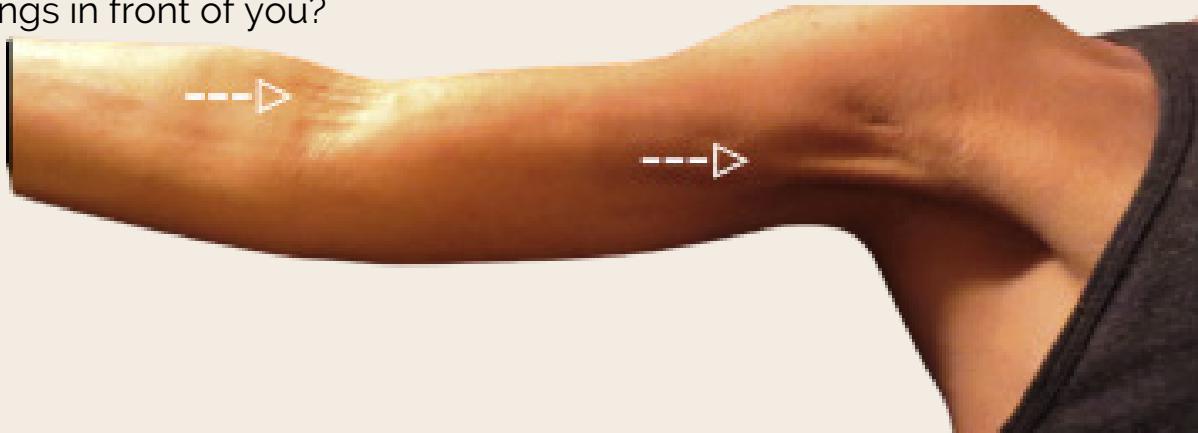


AXILLARY WEB SYNDROME

Axillary Web Syndrome (AWS) is a tethered cord you can see and/or feel under the skin that develops in the armpit and goes down the inner arm. AWS is associated with a lymphatic injury that develops after a sentinel node biopsy or axillary node dissection. It may also develop after breast reconstruction. It tends to appear 2- 4 weeks after surgery but it can appear 18 months later.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SYPTOMS OF AWS?

- Sensing tightness, pulling and pain down the inside arm? Does it go down to the elbow or wrist?
- Having a hard time lifting your arm, straightening your elbow fully, or reaching for things in front of you?



Could it be a SEROMA?

A seroma is a build-up of clear bodily fluids in a place on your body where tissue has been removed by surgery. It can happen in a mastectomy, lumpectomy, lymph node removal or donor site. Please discuss this with your oncology team because it increases your risk of developing an infection in the breast and puts more pressure over the surgical site.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF A SEROMA?

- Feeling the sensation of a ball or fullness under your arm?
- Feeling tender and swollen with a squishy discrete lump?

RADIATION FIBROSIS

The skin, fascia, muscles, bones, blood and lymph vessels are vulnerable to damage and scarring during external beam radiation therapy. Radiation scarring is also called radiation fibrosis. After radiation, the skin may become very dry, look red and feel very irritated. In some cases, the skin may blister, peel and remain permanently darker. There is typically an entrance and exit path so there could be skin reactions on the back.

The effects of radiation fibrosis may become noticeable weeks to years post treatment. Months after treatment, radiation fibrosis can block remaining vessels and nodes and increase the risk of lymphedema. Lymphedema can develop in chest, neck and/or arm.

Fibrosis of the tissue can also lead to adhesions and range of motion issues including rotator cuff dysfunction, serratus anterior muscle weakness and adhesive capsulitis. The adhesions can affect neck movement and deep breathing.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF A RADIATION FIBROSIS?

- Feeling you can't move as well because the armpit or chest wall feels stuck?
- Area feeling tender and swollen 6 months to 2 years after radiation ?
- Skin feeling hard and immobile?



SHOULDER FUNCTION

POSTURAL ISSUES

The full scope of breast cancer treatment can alter a woman's posture. Avoiding moving the arm to protect the surgery area can make the tissues stiffer and weaker. Chest tightness from scar tissue formation can cause rounded shoulders and make your breathing shallow. Scar tissue and radiation fibrosis can also interfere with skin sensitivity, muscle flexibility and strength. Breast reconstruction can also cause other posture imbalances, strength and stability issues specially if there are muscle flaps used.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF POSTURAL ISSUES?

- Having pain, stiffness or spasms in your upper shoulder?
- Upper back constantly aching?
- Struggling to take a deep breath?
- Feeling like you're being pulled forward?
- Feeling muscle weakness?
- Feeling fatigued and can't catch your breath?

SCAPULAR WINGING

Most commonly, scapular winging is a condition that affects the long thoracic nerve, the serratus anterior muscle and the function of the shoulder blade. Instead of sitting flat against the upper back, the inside edge of the shoulder blade appears to stick out giving it a "winged" appearance. Weakness in the serratus anterior can cause compensation in your neck, shoulders and arms muscles.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF SCAPULAR WINGING?

- Problems with lifting, pulling & pushing heavy objects?
- Visible asymmetry between the two shoulder blades?
- Pain, stiffness, spasms in your neck & shoulder?
- Feeling heaviness of the arm and upper traps?



BREAST RECONSTRUCTION

Most breast reconstruction after mastectomy is done in two or more separate surgeries. There are many available options and each process has advantages and disadvantages. Reconstruction may use a temporary tissue expanders before the final reconstruction with implants.

Another option is a type of tissue implant referred as flaps. Flaps are procedures using the body's own tissue to reconstruct a new breast. This tissue (skin, fat, muscle) may be donated from the abdomen, back, inner thigh, latissimus or glute region (TRAM, DIEP, Lat Flap, TUG, SGAP, fat grafting).

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS?

- Any complications or infection with your reconstruction method?
- Pain or pulling sensations with your reconstruction scars (breast or donor sites)?
- Neck, back or shoulder pain or stiffness?
- Chest wall and rib stiffness? Breathing difficulties?
- Pain or pulling around the drain tube scar sites?
- Muscle weakness in your upper back or core?
- Persistent swelling?
- Worried that your posture is changing?
- Are you being told that the pain is in your head?

CAPSULAR CONTRACTION

Capsular contraction is scar tissue that forms around the breast implant. The contraction can squeeze the implant causing a distortion in the shape of the breast. The breast may rise higher on the chest wall. It is more common following hematoma, seroma, infection or rupture and leakage of the implant.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF CAPSULAR CONTRACTION?

- Increasing firmness or tightness in the breast?
- Chronic pain and stiffness?
- Changes in the position and shape of the breast?



GET PROFESSIONAL HELP

Cancer treatment can be overwhelming, invasive, and brutal. It may leave you uneasy about your body image and whether you'll ever return to the life and activities you love. But skilled, attentive touch can help piece your body together again and restore hope in the healing process. The earlier you get help, the more your long-term physical and emotional recovery will benefit. Your body may have a "new normal," but you don't have to suffer.

A properly designed program of massage therapy, exercise therapy, and lymphedema management can reduce long-term side effects that lead to unnecessary pain and suffering. The appearance and sensations you may have developed around the scars, the tightness in your skin and muscles, the strength you have lost, the changes in your posture and breathing, and your diminished sense of overall well-being -- all these things **CAN CHANGE!**

Physical therapists can guide you through mobility and strengthening exercises during the different stages of treatment and recovery. Many PTs are also lymphedema specialists or complete decongestive therapists (CDT), trained in the treatment of lymphedema.

Oncology-trained massage therapists, such as myself, use hands-on therapy skills, including MLD, to safely and effectively treat scar tissue, skin tightness, tissue stiffness, shoulder mobility, range of motion, swelling, and post cancer treatment pain.

Other therapies and practices, like acupuncture, chiropractic, yoga, Pilates, and personal training can also contribute to your long-term well being.

**PRACTITIONERS WHO CARE ARE HERE TO OFFER OUR SKILLS
AND HELP YOU MOVE FORWARD IN YOUR HEALING JOURNEY.**

REACH OUT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS 970-509-0348

HOW TO MASSAGE YOUR SCAR

First, step back and take into account any fear, anxiety, trauma or body image issues you may have with your scar. Take a slow, calm breath. If you're comfortable, simply put your hands over the area of the scar. This alone can be extremely therapeutic. In the beginning, just focus on taking care of your skin and surface scar.

The area around your scar may feel painful, tight, raised or puckered. After radiation, your skin may still feel warm and not as flexible. Very gentle massage can greatly improve circulation in the tissues, relax the stiffness and pain, and help with the final appearance of the scar. Massaging too hard can inflame, disrupt and delay the healing process. Wait until the incision is closed and radiated tissue has healed.

PRACTICE LIKE THIS on mastectomy & lumpectomy scars and radiated tissue.

- Start an inch or two away from the scar. Use a **broad soft hand or finger pads** to apply **GENTLE pressure** on the skin. Avoid making the skin red.
- With your hands or fingers flat and soft try to move the skin horizontally toward the scar. Avoid spreading or pulling the scar apart, the tissues need to knit back together.
- Move a hand width (or finger pad width) apart and continue moving the skin all around the scar. Feel for areas of skin stiffness, press horizontally and hold for two seconds. Move on to the next spot. Inch by inch, cover the whole chest area. Areas that feel tender, just maintain gentle contact for a few seconds and then move to the next spot.
- You can spend a few minutes a day several times a day doing this.

PS: The image in the far right is just an example of how to use both hands.



MASSAGE STYLES & THEIR PURPOSE

SWEDISH MASSAGE and DEEP TISSUE MASSAGE

Swedish massage is suited for people interested in relaxation. It's usually a full body massage using light to firm pressure. The therapist uses oil, cream or lotion to glide over the skin and muscles. Deep tissue massage can be a deep-pressure version of a Swedish full-body massage. It can also incorporate focused work to sore or painful areas of the body.

Strong pressure is contraindicated while undergoing cancer treatment. Avoid deep tissue massage in the quadrant where lymph nodes have been removed (this includes the arm, chest and back) or received radiation regardless of a lymphedema diagnosis. Avoid areas with mesh.

ONCOLOGY MASSAGE

Oncology massage is a gentle Swedish style massage based on working knowledge of cancer and its effects on the body. It allows for adjustments needed if person is currently in cancer treatment and recovery. Benefits include reducing symptoms of pain, nausea, anxiety, fatigue and improves relaxation.

MEDICAL MASSAGE

Medical massage therapy is focused on providing pain relief from specific injuries, surgeries or medical condition. It's therapeutic massage often times prescribed by a medical provider. Commonly used techniques include MFR and MLD (see below).

MYOFASCIAL RELEASE

MFR is performed directly on skin without oils or creams. It's usually performed with slow sustained pressure on the skin and fascia instead of the "glide" of a traditional massage. This technique can relieve the adhesions and pain associated with scars.

MANUAL LYMPHATIC DRAINAGE

MLD is a specific light skin stretch technique designed to move and redirect fluid (lymph and interstitial fluid) out of a swollen area into healthy lymph vessels. It's performed on dry skin similar to MFR. The technique is used for post surgical swelling, pain control and lymphedema.

WHEN CAN I START...?

ALWAYS consult with your Oncology Team for timelines, recommendations and referrals:

- **PHYSICAL THERAPY**

PT can be an integral part of your rehab process before, during and after treatment. Ideally, they have training in oncology rehab to address lymphedema and other long term effects of treatment. A properly designed course of exercises can help with shoulder dysfunction, posture changes and overall wellbeing.

- **ONCOLOGY MASSAGE**

Skilled touch can be received throughout treatment and recovery. Safety adjustments are made to support the person physically and emotionally. This kind of massage can help reduce pain, anxiety, fatigue, insomnia and nausea.

- **MEDICAL MASSAGE**

Massage therapy, gentle scar tissue therapy and myofascial release can begin after the post surgical incisions are closed (usually 3 weeks post op). Wait until the skin is healed about 4-6 weeks after radiation is completed.

- **COMPLETE DECONGESTIVE THERAPY (CDT)**

The treatment of lymphedema is managed by therapists certified in CDT. It has four parts: manual lymphatic drainage, compression bandaging, evaluation for garments, and instruction in exercise and self-care. Begin as soon as you have been diagnosed.

- **MANUAL LYMPHATIC DRAINAGE (MLD)**

MLD is a specific hands on technique used by trained therapists to move or reroute fluid to functioning lymph vessels and nodes. Use to reduce swelling, lymphedema and pain.

RESOURCES

- **Supportive or Survivorship Care Teams**

Cancer Centers and Hospitals offer integrative services designed to help patients cope with the cancer experience and improve their overall sense of well-being. For example, in Grand County, I'm a provider of oncology massage therapy for the patients of the **Shaw Cancer Centers' Survivorship Program**. The Shaw Center's Wellness services include massage therapy, reiki, acupuncture, nutrition and fitness at no cost to their patients. Inquire if your hospital provides a similar program.

- **National Lymphedema Network**

www.lymphnet.org

- **The Society for Oncology Massage**

<https://www.s4om.org>

- **Klose Training Lymphedema Therapist Directory**

<https://klosetraining.com/resources/self-care-videos/>

- **Cancer Exercise Training Institute** Personal Trainer Education

<https://thecancerspecialist.com>

- **Oncology Rehab Physical Therapists** (Denver Area)

<https://thecancerspecialist.com>

- Facebook's **The Recovery Room, Cancer Physical Therapy Expert, Dr. Leslie J. Waltke** answers questions about side effects, recovery, health and exercise after cancer.

- **Breast Cancer Rehabilitation & Wellness Online Summit**

<https://www.breastcancer-rehabandwellness.com>



HEALTH ADVICE DISCLAIMER

This guide is focused on the musculoskeletal and lymphatic conditions that can develop after breast cancer treatment. Ideally, your medical team has been proactive and referred you to therapy. If you've been cleared, seek the help of a trusted therapist who has training and experience with oncology related conditions. Please consult with your medical provider or surgeon to ensure the advice that is found in this guide is useful and applies to you.

COVID-19

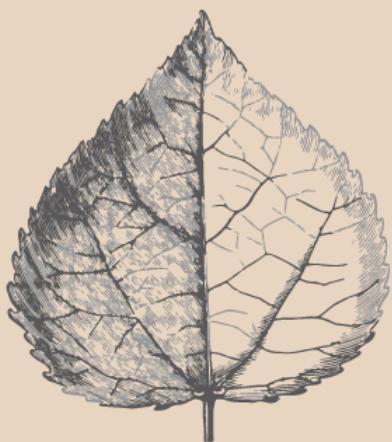
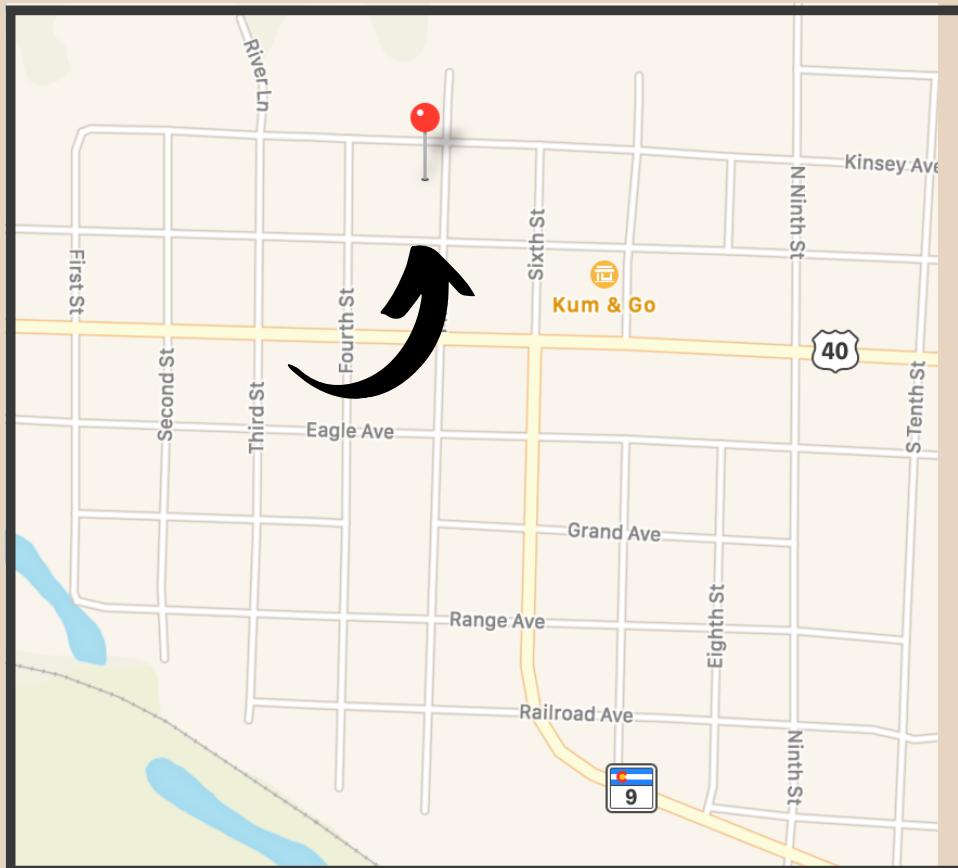
The Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment (DORA) regulates all healthcare professions in our state. Their COVID-19 public health order mandates mask requirements for patient and practitioner, symptom screening, and strict cleaning guidelines.

How can a rehab provider support you in situations when physical distance cannot be maintained? Ask your provider if they are able to schedule an appointment through TeleHealth, Zoom or FaceTime. If you want a person-to-person appointment, find out the protocols your provider is enforcing to keep you as safe as possible.

There are numerous self care videos and literature resources that can also be of value to you. Check the RESOURCES page for some ideas.

**IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS or
TO SCHEDULE AN APPOINTMENT**

call 970-509-0348



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