Self-Care Following Breast Reconstruction Using a Tissue Expander

Nasrin Vaziri, RN, CPSN

Introduction

This booklet will help you learn about breast reconstruction with a tissue expander and how to care for yourself after its insertion. The tissue expander is placed during surgery. It is an empty balloon that will be filled with sterile salt water over six to eight weeks. This process slowly stretches your skin and muscle. When your new breast mound reaches the right size, we will stop the expansion procedure. Your permanent breast implant will be inserted after another six to eight weeks. If you have chemotherapy or radiation therapy, your doctor will tell you when the implant will be placed. This booklet is meant to supplement, not replace, talks with doctors and nurses. Some of the information may not apply to you. Be sure to ask your plastic surgeon or nurse about what might differ in your situation.

Topics in this booklet are:

1. What to expect after your surgery
2. Caring for your incision
3. The tissue expansion
4. Comfort measures
5. Exercise
6. Clothing hints
7. Completion of your breast reconstruction
8. Upper body exercises

What to Expect After Your Surgery

After your surgery, you will have a large gauze dressing over the incision. The dressing is held in place by a surgical bra. It is put on you while you are in the operating room. One or two small plastic drains may be placed near your incision line. These collect fluid that normally develops under the skin after surgery. The drain(s) usually remain in place for one to two weeks. Your doctor will remove them when the amount of your drainage is less than 30 cc (about 1 fluid ounce) in 24 hours. Most patients describe the drain removal as a slight pulling or stinging sensation that lasts only a few minutes. You will not need to take pain medicine for drain removal.

After your drain(s) are removed, some fluid may continue to leak from the site. Cover the area with a sterile gauze pad and change it if it becomes damp. This drainage is normal and can be expected for 24 to 48 hours, after which time the site is usually healed. Do not wet your drain site(s). You will be able to take a full shower one or two days after your drain(s) are removed. Before that, use a shower spray only below your waist and sponge bathe above your waist. Your doctor or nurse will tell you when you can begin taking a full shower.

Some discomfort is normal after surgery. You may have a stinging sensation along the incision line and your drain site(s) may itch. You may also notice some tenderness along your lower rib cage. These sensations gradually decrease after surgery. You may take pain medication when you need it. Be sure to ask for it so you will be as comfortable and active as possible.

Other common sensations after your surgery include:

- Numbness under the arm and over the chest.
- Warmth in the arm.
- A feeling of water trickling down the arm.

These sensations are caused by the nerves being cut or moved during the mastectomy. They will gradually get better as the months go by, but some degree of numbness may be permanent.

Caring For Your Incision

While you are in the hospital, your doctor or nurse will examine the reconstructed breast every day and change the dressing as needed. We encourage you to look at your chest during the dressing changes so you are familiar with how it looks. When you are ready, you can care for your incision with help from your nurse. This will help prepare you to care for yourself at home.

At first, the size of the reconstructed breast is much smaller than your natural breast. This is because the tissue expander is not completely filled when it is inserted. Before you go home and with your nurse present, we would like you to gently touch the new breast mound. You may be able to feel the port under your skin. It is used to fill the expander. The incision line across the breast mound is closed with stitches (sutures). You may see some redness and some slight bloodstains on the gauze pad. You may also feel tenderness around the incision. These are normal signs after surgery. After examining the area, the nurse will place a fresh gauze pad over your suture line.

When you leave the hospital, your sutures and paper tapes will still be in place. They will be covered with a gauze pad. You can wear the surgical bra or any support bra that does not have an underwire and that does not press on the tissue expander.

You can begin taking regular showers two days after the drain(s) is removed. We recommend daily showers to help keep the suture line clean. Do not take tub baths until your incision is fully healed because soaking may increase the risk of infection. Full healing takes about six to eight weeks. Before entering the shower, remove your bra and the gauze pad. Wash with lukewarm water and plain nonperfumed soap. Gently clean the incision line and skin. Rinse well. The shower stream should not be directed at your reconstructed breast if the water pressure makes you feel uncomfortable. Pat the incision line dry with a clean towel; do not rub it.

Only use an electric razor to shave under your arm on the side of surgery. Also, deodorant could cause an infection. Do not put it on until after you have put your bra on. That will prevent the deodorant from getting on your incision and drain sites. Do not use deodorant on the side of surgery if there is any break in the skin there.

After your shower, inspect the incision line and drain site carefully. To do this, stand in front of a mirror in a room with good lighting. Call your plastic surgeon or nurse if you have any of the following:

- Skin redness not there before
- New drainage from the incision
- A temperature above 101° F (38.3° C)

When you have finished the inspection, place a clean gauze pad over the incision line. You should wear the bra 24 hours a day. It will hold the dressing and drains in place.

What to Expect During Tissue Expansion

Your first post-operative visit will be ten days to two weeks after your surgery. Call your surgeon's office to make an appointment as soon as you can. Fluid will be added to the expander during this visit. Your plastic surgeon and nurse will examine the incision to insure that it is healing well. If the sutures are not the kind that dissolve on their own, the surgeon will decide when they should be taken out.

This first visit is a good time to bring up any questions you may have. During expansion, the breast mound will not have the shape and size of the opposite breast. The breast will not take its final form until the permanent implant is inserted.

You will return to your doctor's office every week for six to eight weeks to complete the expansion process. Before each expansion, your breast mound and incision line will be examined. The tissue expander is inflated with sterile salt water through the port via a small needle. The expansion takes about twenty minutes each week. You may feel some tightness and fullness in the breast area and some discomfort in your shoulder or back. It generally gets better within a day or two. After each expansion, you should continue your normal activity. You can return to work or do light housekeeping a few hours later. You can also drive when you have full range of motion in your shoulder on the operated side and are not taking any narcotic pain medicine. If your job involves lifting 10 pounds or more, you may need to change your work schedule until it is safe for you to lift heavy weights. If you have any questions, ask your doctor or nurse.

Comfort Measures

Between expansions, there are a few things you can do at home to feel more comfortable. Warm shower, acetaminophen (Tylenol®), or ibuprofen (Advil®), may help ease the tightness and discomfort. You may notice that your skin becomes dry and flaky as it expands. A non-perfumed moisturizer can be soothing. You can use it once a day. Do not put the lotion directly on the incision for the first six weeks. **Do not apply a heating pad or warm compress directly on the breast mound.** It is possible to burn the skin because your sensation has changed. Your nurse will show you the stretching exercises you should do at home. During your weekly visits, your nurse will review your progress with these exercises.

Exercise

Do the simple exercises shown at the end of the booklet which can be done at home. They can be done at home without special equipment. They will improve your comfort and flexibility. Regular exercise after your surgery and during expansion is good for you, but there are some you should not do. Do not do high impact aerobics, jog, lift weights, or swim until your doctor approves. Avoid exercises which build up your chest muscles (pectoralis).

Clothing Hints

When you leave the hospital, you will be wearing a surgical bra. After the drains are removed you may choose to wear your own bra. It should:

- Be comfortable.
- Not be too tight.
- Not have an underwire.
- Not press directly on the tissue expander.

To help balance your appearance in clothing you may fill your bra with a soft breast form. This can be purchased from the Breast Boutique at the Breast and Imaging Center (300 E. 66th Street). This breast form is a lightweight nylon pouch, and its size can be adjusted to match the opposite breast by adding or removing the cotton fluff

inside. This is especially useful as the breast mound becomes larger during expansion. It can be laundered using a mild soap such as Woolite® or Ivory®. It should be washed once a week and then air-dried.

Another way to achieve a balanced look is to use shoulder pads, which come in a variety of shapes and sizes. You may also line the bra with soft gauze. Replace the gauze frequently enough to make sure that it is always clean.

As your plastic surgeon told you, the tissue expander will be over-inflated. As you near the end of your expansion, sometimes your new breast mound may look about one third larger than your natural breast. To hide this imbalance, wear:

- Loose blouses, tops, and sweaters
- Dark knit tops under a looser open blouse, sweater, or blazer
- Tops with diagonal stripes
- Asymmetrical prints
- A neck scarf or shawl

Completion of Breast Reconstruction

Once you have finished your tissue expansion, the next stage of breast reconstruction will be scheduled. This stage is the removal of the expander and placement of the permanent implant. The surgery will be done six to eight weeks after expansion is completed so the skin can rest. This date may change if you need other treatments such as chemotherapy or radiation. After you are fully expanded, you will not need the weekly visits to the Ambulatory Care Department during this time. If it is indicated, the surgeon will discuss surgery on the opposite breast to make it match the shape and size of your reconstructed breast. It is done to make the natural and new breasts look as similar as possible in shape and size. Whether to have or not have surgery on the opposite breast is up to you. You may want to decide later or choose not to have the surgery at all.

The exchange of the tissue expander for the permanent implant takes about one hour for each side. If a matching procedure is done on the other breast, it takes more time. It can usually be done in the Surgical Day Hospital. You will be able to go home three to four hours after your surgery.

If you decide to have a nipple reconstruction, it is usually done about two to four months after the permanent implant is placed. Surgery on the other breast may also be done at this time. Nipple reconstruction can be done either in the Surgical Day Hospital or in your surgeon's office. If your reconstructed nipple/areola needs to be darkened, tattooing of the area can be done in the office.

Conclusion

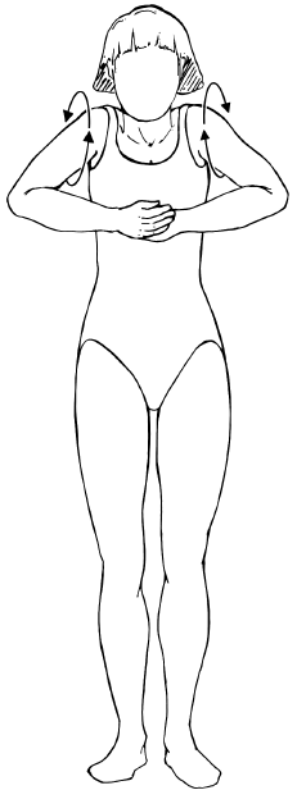
We hope this booklet will help to explain the process of your reconstruction. Do not hesitate to seek help or support for your concerns from your plastic surgeon or nurse. If you have questions, please contact us.

Plastic Surgeon _____

Telephone _____

Nurse _____

Telephone _____



Exercise Guide

Your surgeon or nurse may ask you to delay the start of exercises. This is because of the condition of the skin at the surgical site. They will tell you how long you should wait.

Shoulder Roll

When To Start:
One day after the day of surgery

How Often:
10 repetitions, 5 times a day or as often as needed

Purpose:
Releases tense shoulders and upper back discomfort

Stand with your hands clasped loosely in front of you. Lift your shoulders and rotate them in a forward circular motion. Repeat the exercise, rotating your shoulders in a backwards circular motion.

Make Wings

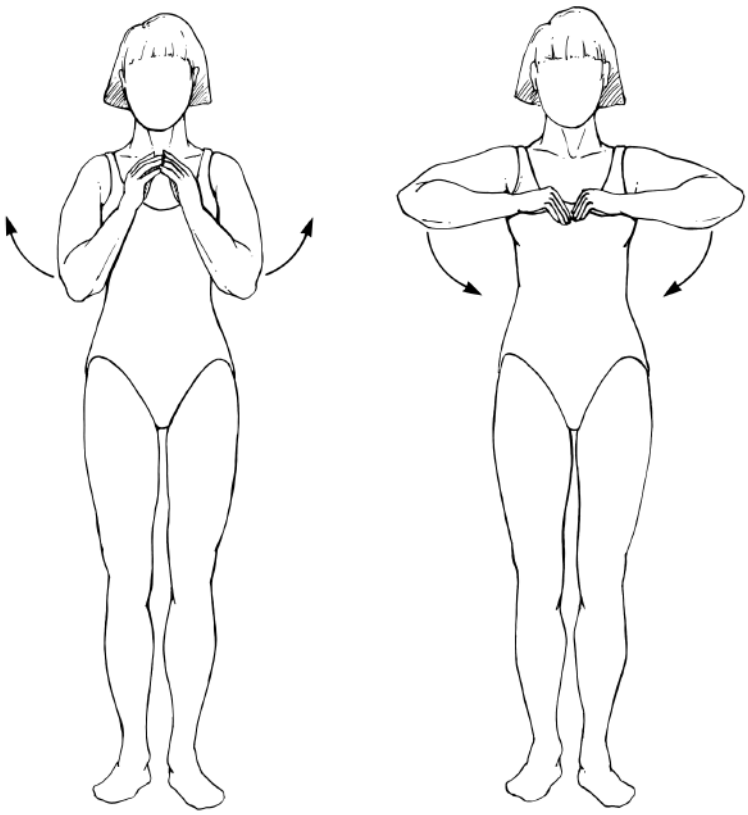
When To Start:
One day after the day of surgery

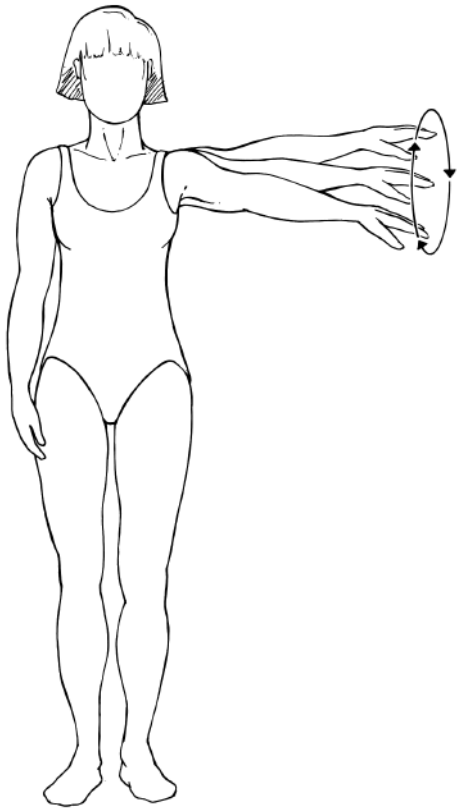
How Often:
10 repetitions, 5 times a day or as often as needed

Purpose:
Helps to stretch the neck, upper back, and upper arms

Make wings up to shoulder height.

1. Bend both elbows. Place both hands in front of your waist.
2. Lift your elbows upwards on each side.
3. Make wings up to shoulder height.





Arm Circles

When To Start:
One day after surgery

How Often:
10 repetitions, 5 times a day

Purpose:
Improves range of motion and prevents stiff or frozen shoulders

Stand with one arm stretched out to the side. Rotate the outstretched arm in a clockwise motion in a circle. Repeat the exercise with the same arm rotating in a counterclockwise motion. After you finish the repetitions, switch arms and do the exercise with your other arm.

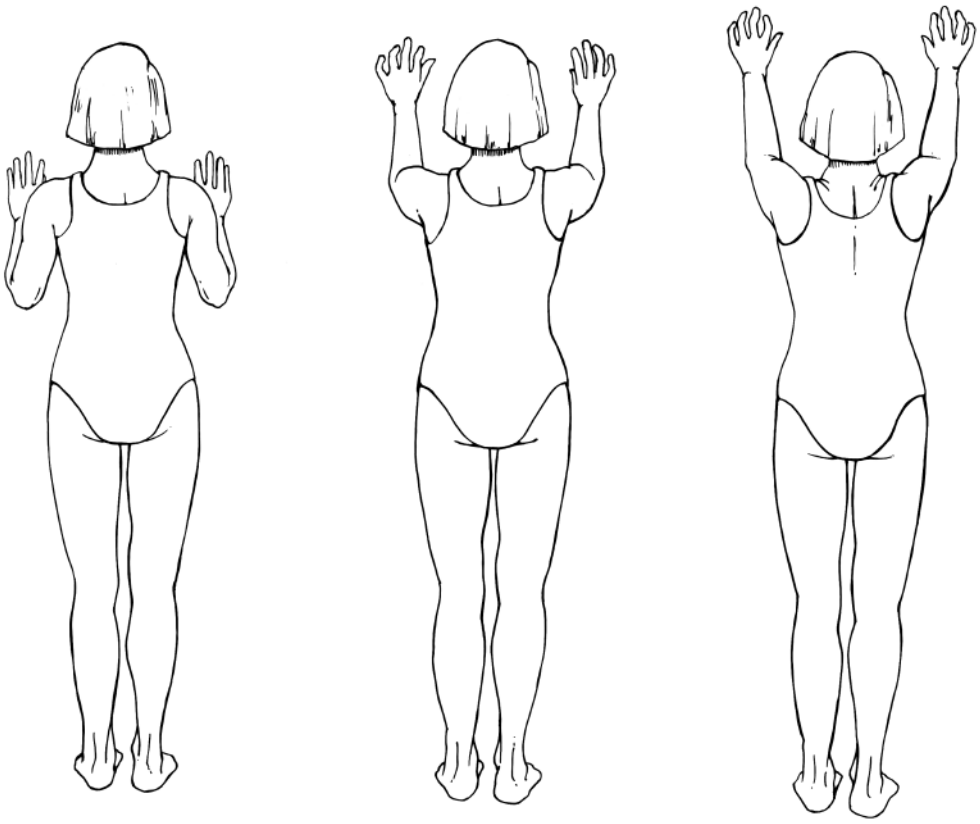
Wall Crawl

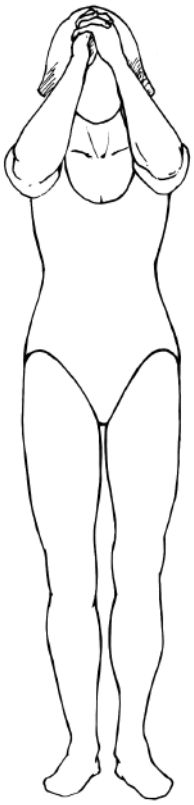
When To Start:
At first postoperative visit (10 days after the day of surgery)

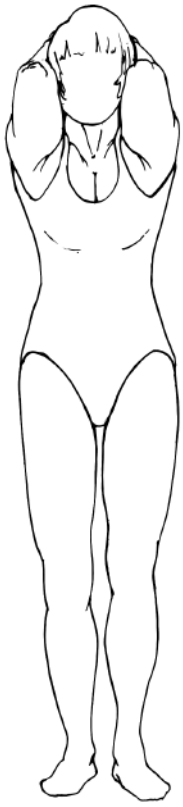
How Often:
10 repetitions, 5 times a day

Purpose:
Improves range of motion in arm and shoulder

Face the wall and stand approximately one foot away from it. Bend your elbows and place your hands flat against the wall at about shoulder height. Slowly move your hands up as far as you can. The goal is to reach a point where extending the arm on the operated side will be comfortable.







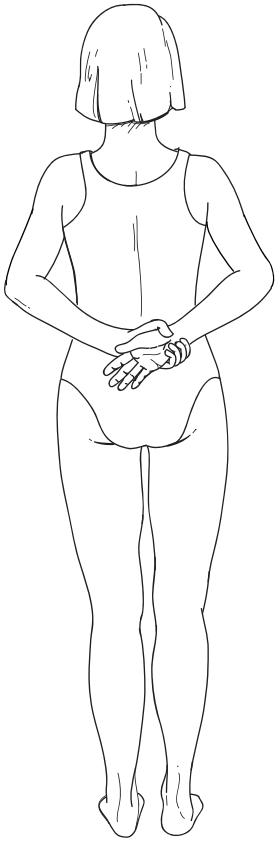
Hands Behind Neck

When To Start:
After the first post-operative visit with your doctor.

How Often:
1 repetition with 1 minute hold, 5 times a day

Purpose:
Helps to stretch the neck, upper back, and upper arms

Clasp your hands loosely in front of you. Slowly bring them up and over your head and down behind your neck. Bring your elbows forward, as far in front of you as you can.



Back Climb

When To Start:
If you have had a tissue expander start the day after your surgery. For all other reconstructive surgeries after the first post-operative visit with your doctor.

How Often:
1 repetition with 1 minute hold, 5 times a day

Purpose:
Helps to stretch your shoulders and chest. This exercise can be performed either sitting or standing. Place your hands behind your back grasping your involved hand. Slowly slide your hands up the center of your back as far as possible. Hold the highest position for one minute. If you feel discomfort in the incisional areas, stop at that position and take some deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose and blow out through your mouth several times. If the discomfort passes, try to slide your hands up a little bit further. Remember to hold the highest position for one minute. This exercise helps you regain the movement behind your back. You need this for activities such as hooking your bra, buttoning up a blouse, or zipping up a dress. You should be feeling a gentle stretch in the shoulder area. When one minute is up, lower your hands.

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