

After Your Breast Surgery: A Guide to Recovery

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Introduction

This booklet has been written for you, your family, and friends. It describes what you can expect after your surgery, instructions to take care of yourself, and your follow-up care.

Incisions

If you had a lumpectomy and axillary lymph node dissection, you will have one incision on the breast and one under the armpit. If you had a mastectomy, you will have one incision that goes from your breast bone in the center of your chest to your underarm. All incisions are closed with stitches under the skin. These stitches dissolve on their own and do not need to be removed. The skin is usually closed with small pieces of surgical tape called Steri-Strips®. These will come off on their own as your skin heals. If you wish, you may remove them 10 days after your surgery.

Dressings

If you had a lumpectomy and axillary dissection, you will have dressings over your incisions which you may remove after 48 hours. You should wear a bra for comfort and support while you are awake. You may also find it more comfortable to sleep with the bra on for the first few nights. If you had a mastectomy, your nurse will give you further instructions while you are in the hospital.

Drainage Tubes

During your surgery, drainage tubes may have been placed in the surgical area near your incision. These tubes help drain fluid to reduce swelling and promote healing. The drainage tubes are stitched in place so they will not fall out. They are connected to a container which collects the drainage. You will be given a surgical bra to hold the drains in place. If you have drainage tubes, your nurse will show you how to empty and care for them. You will also receive a booklet that your nurse will review with you before you are discharged.

Showering

If you have not had reconstruction, ask your doctor or nurse if you may shower 24 or 48 hours after your surgery. Wash your incision with soap, and rinse it with water. Pat it dry with a clean towel. You can leave the incision uncovered or cover it with a gauze dressing. Do not apply deodorants, lotions, powder, or perfume near the incision until 10 days after your surgery.

Sensations

After breast surgery you may feel strange sensations in the arm, breast, or chest wall. You may feel various sensations, including tenderness, numbness, or twinges. These are called *referred sensations*. If your breast has been removed, your nerve pathways will take time to sense the loss. Because of this, you may feel that your nipple

and/or breast is still present. These are called *phantom sensations*. Most women have some or all of these sensations. They usually diminish within the first few months after surgery. However, some may last months, even up to five years and possibly longer. This is because the nerves are the slowest part of your body to heal. Most people report that the sensations are not distressing or severe.

Pain Control

Your surgeon will prescribe pain medicine for you to take at home.

Pain medicine may cause constipation, especially when you are less active than normal. To prevent this:

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Eat a diet rich in fiber.
- Stay as active as your doctor permits.

Good sources of fiber are fresh fruit, bran, and vegetables. Stool softeners or laxatives may also help. If these measures do not relieve constipation, contact your doctor or nurse.

Breast Forms If You Had a Mastectomy

If you have had a mastectomy, you may wish to purchase a temporary breast form (prosthesis). This form is also known as a “fluff” and may be worn after surgery. It is made of cotton and fiberfill and can be washed by hand. It is lightweight so that it will not put too much pressure on your incision. These are sold at our boutique on the second floor of the Evelyn H. Lauder Breast Center.

When your incision has fully healed, you can begin wearing a permanent prosthesis. The permanent prosthesis is matched to your other breast for a natural appearance. If both breasts have been removed, you can wear two matching prostheses. Most insurance companies cover some part of the cost, often up to 80%. Ask how much they will pay and how often you can replace them. Your doctor will give you a prescription to submit to the insurance company.

There are many types of permanent breast forms. Mastectomy boutiques and department or lingerie stores sell them. The boutique at the Evelyn H. Lauder Breast Center has a full range. A fitter will help you find the best prosthesis for you. If you prefer to shop closer to your home, contact *Reach to Recovery* at the American Cancer Society by calling 1-800-ACS-2345. The volunteers can give you a list of stores in your area.

Do not buy your permanent breast form until your incision has fully healed. Most women can start wearing the prosthesis four to six weeks after surgery. Check with your nurse to be sure. It might be helpful to take a close friend or family member with you when you select your prosthesis. To help you choose one that will suit you, wear a form-fitting garment or sweater or bring one with you. That way you can see how different types of breast forms will look. There are many different sizes, styles, and prices. A breast prosthesis should provide the comfort, peace of mind, and security of a natural look. You can still wear tight-fitting blouses, V-shaped necklines, bathing suits, and lingerie. A certified fitter can help you with your clothing concerns.

Activities and Exercise

Scar tissue that forms near the surgical area can limit the motion of your shoulder. To prevent this, use your arm for your daily activities. Use the arm on the operated side to brush your hair, bathe, and get dressed.

You will also learn some arm and shoulder exercises. If you are admitted to the hospital, these are taught in a class you will attend before you go home. If you are not admitted, you will be given education materials that illustrate the exercises. Do the exercises three times a day for about four to six weeks until you can use your arm as you did before surgery. If you quickly regain full range of motion, continue doing the exercises once a day. This is especial-

ly true if you feel a stretch in the chest or under the arm during certain exercises. If so, continue doing those exercises. The exercises will help prevent scar tissue from forming, and interfering with your range of motion later.

It is normal to feel tired after breast surgery. It may be helpful to set aside rest time during the day. As you feel stronger, you can begin to get back to your normal routine. Ask your doctor or nurse when you can go back to work. Do not drive a car until your drain is out and you are off all pain medicine. Do not drive until you have enough range of motion in your arm to turn the wheel suddenly in an emergency. Do not lift more than 10 lbs with the arm on the affected side until your incision has healed completely.

Hand and Arm Care

If you have had axillary lymph nodes removed, the way fluid circulates in your arm may have changed. Follow the hand and arm care guidelines your nurse will give you. They may help minimize the risk of infection or lymphedema. Your nurse will review them with you in the hospital if you are admitted or during your first post-operative visit.

Adjusting Emotionally

Physical recovery from breast surgery is very quick. Emotional recovery may take longer. Feelings of fear, anger, and loss are common. Your operation may have changed how you look and perhaps even how you feel about yourself. You may wonder if and how the breast surgery will affect your life and relationships. You might even be unsure of how to act toward your family and friends.

Telling your healthcare providers and the people you love how you feel can be important emotional medicine. Let others know what is helpful to you. Many family members and friends are unsure of what to do or say. If you share your feelings with them, it may help you get the support you need. It will also allow them to let you know how much they care.

If you would like counseling, your nurse can make a referral for you. You can see a social worker, psychiatrist, or psychologist. You may want to speak with a patient-to-patient volunteer who has had breast cancer. Our Post-Treatment Resource Program (PTRP) provides support services after your treatment is finished. To learn more about their services, call (646) 888-4740.

Intimacy

It is important to feel and stay close to your partner. After breast surgery, you can resume all levels of intimacy. The surgical area will not be harmed by sexual relations.

It may be helpful to let your partner see your incision soon after surgery. This may decrease any anxiety you both may feel. Your nurse can tell you what to expect as the incision heals. Some partners worry that touching the incision(s) will hurt you. Let your partner know what is and is not comfortable. Try different positions to find the one most comfortable for lovemaking. You may not want pressure on the surgical site in the first weeks after surgery. Try placing a small pillow or towel over the surgical area.

Your partner may hold back from sex in an effort not to rush you. You may not feel as attractive as before. You may want reassurance, but you may also hold your partner at arm's length. Be open with your partner. Share your thoughts and feelings. Being willing to discuss these intimate matters will help you have the closeness, warmth, and pleasure of a loving relationship.

Follow-Up care

You will return to your doctor's office for your pathology report about a week after you go home. This is your post-operative visit. If you need more treatment, your doctor will arrange it. During this visit we will also see how you are doing after the surgery and look at your wound and drainage.

Your surgeon will tell you how often you will need to be seen in the future. Some patients need more treatment. In this case, you may see one doctor one month and another a few months later. These visits are to provide you with close monitoring. You may call your doctor or nurse between visits if you have any questions or concerns.

Call Your Doctor or Nurse If You Have:

- An increase in pain in your chest or arm that is not relieved with activity or pain medicine.
- A temperature of 101°F (38.3°C) or chills.
- Increasing redness, swelling, or drainage at or near the incision, your arm, hand, or under your arm.

If you have any other questions, don't hesitate to ask to speak with your doctor or nurse.

Doctor _____

Telephone _____

Nurse _____

Telephone _____

If you need to reach us after regular office hours, call 212-639-7900 and ask for the doctor on call for your service, i.e., breast or melanoma.