

Going home after a mastectomy

Breast Care Unit Patient Information Leaflet

Introduction

This booklet is designed to provide you with some information about what you need to do after your mastectomy. It also provides you with contact numbers if you need some help or advice.

What are wound drains?

During your operation, small plastic tubes known as wound drains are placed under your skin near the operation site. The fluid from the wound drains through these tubes into a bag or bottle, and this helps to prevent complications developing later.

It is likely that at least one drain will be removed in hospital but you may go home with the remaining drain(s) still in place. The ward nursing staff will make arrangements with you for the drains to be removed, usually one to three days later. However, this will depend on each individual surgeon and their specific instructions.

When your last drain is removed, the nurse will put on a small dressing which you can remove two days later. The drains do not need any special care; just avoid pulling them if you can.

How do I look after my wound?

Your wound will be checked before you leave hospital. In most cases, the stitches are dissolvable and will not need to be removed. All dressings should be removed to assist with healing so you should ask the nurse at your GP surgery to remove them five days after your operation, or as advised by your surgeon.

You might find that as the bruising develops, you become uncomfortable and sore. Painkillers such as paracetamol should be enough to take this uncomfortable feeling away (always read the label; do not exceed the recommended dose).

It is quite normal for your arm, breast or chest wall to tingle, feel tight and be tender. This may persist for a few weeks after surgery.

If you have had some lymph nodes removed, you may have a numb feeling on the inside of your arm and sometimes it can be quite painful. It should improve with time although some areas can occasionally remain numb.

It is important that you do arm exercises after your operation to encourage a full range of movement back into your arm. These should be continued three times a day for at least six months. The breast care nurses and the physiotherapist will give you a leaflet explaining the exercises before you leave hospital.

Occasionally, you may notice inflammation or signs of infection, such as redness, heat, swelling or discharge from the wound. Please ring the breast care nurses on 01384 244065 or your GP for advice, if you notice any of these.

Collection of fluid under the wound

In the first weeks after surgery, some women get a collection of fluid usually along the scar line or in the armpit area. The fluid is quite harmless and usually goes away by itself.

However, if it forms a lump that limits your movement, we may need to remove some of the fluid using a syringe and needle. If you have any concerns about this, please ring the breast care nurses for advice.

What about baths and showers?

In the first three days after surgery, it does not matter if you splash your dressing but avoid soaking it. Once the dressings are removed, a daily bath or shower is advisable but avoid using perfumed soap or deodorants until your scar is well healed. Carefully pat your skin dry afterwards.

Your emotions

It can be very frightening to know that you are going to lose your breast and it is often difficult to take everything in that is said to you at the time this is discussed.

Often your emotions are on a roller coaster and may range from anger and bitterness to sadness and distress. There may be times when you feel distracted and unable to concentrate, or you may have difficulty sleeping. Feeling numb is also an emotional response, a self-protective one which intends to shield you from deeper feelings that threaten and overwhelm you. All of these emotions are normal and may continue for some time.

Expect to have a few days when you feel more 'weepy' than normal – this is to be expected. Over a period of time this will become less and less frequent. Tears are a release mechanism within the body. You will find that you move through these emotions as part of the process of coming to terms with having cancer.

If you would like to talk to someone about this, please contact the breast care nurses.

What is a breast prosthesis?

A removable breast prosthesis is a replacement for a natural breast which fits inside your bra. The first prosthesis we give you will be a temporary one made of soft lightweight material, known as a softie. You should be fitted with a softie before leaving hospital. It is your choice whether you wear it or not.

A more permanent, removable prosthesis made of silicone will be offered to you. This will be fitted after your operation when your wound has healed and the swelling has reduced. We will send you an appointment for this fitting six weeks after your operation. If you do not receive this, please contact the breast care nurses to make your appointment.

These usually need replacing every three to four years, or sooner if you lose or gain weight. It is not necessary to buy any new bras before your prosthesis-fitting appointment.

What clothes should I wear?

This depends entirely on how quickly the scar line heals and how you feel. Some women find that straight after the surgery anything that puts pressure on the healing wound is uncomfortable. So for about six weeks after surgery, you may find a bra too restrictive.

You may prefer to wear a camisole, crop top or seamless cotton vest whilst at home, and wear your bra and soft prosthesis when you go out. Just wear what you feel comfortable in.

Should I rest or exercise?

You will probably feel tired after your operation, both emotionally and physically, so take things slowly and build up to normal activity gradually. Resting is important.

However, it is important to continue with the exercises you have been shown as this will help you get a full range of movement back in your arm and shoulder.

There is very little restriction on what you can and cannot do. However, it is advisable to avoid heavy lifting, such as shopping bags or a vacuum cleaner, for about six weeks after the operation until your wound has fully healed. Some people find that swimming is a comfortable exercise once the wound has healed.

Should I drive?

It is best to avoid driving for two to three weeks. This allows the wound to heal and ensures that you are able to react in emergency situations without the fear of hurting your wound. When you feel able to drive, it is best to contact your car insurance company and check their rules for driving after an operation.

When should I go back to work?

This depends on you; there are no right or wrong times. It depends on the type of work you do and how you feel in yourself. Most women take three to five weeks off work after surgery. If you ask on the ward you stay on, staff will give you a first fit note (Statement of Fitness to Work – sick note). Your GP will give you a final note so that you can return to work.

When will I get the results of my operation?

We will give you an outpatient appointment either before you leave the ward, or alternatively it will be sent through the post. This is usually two to three weeks after your operation.

At this appointment, your consultant will explain your results to you, and discuss any further treatment. You may want to write down any questions in preparation for this visit. Do not feel that you have to attend any appointment alone. You are very welcome to bring your husband, partner or a friend.

It is likely that your surgeon will want you to meet one of the oncologists (cancer specialists) who are part of the breast cancer team, to discuss any additional treatments that may be beneficial. A referral to the oncologist will be discussed with you at the time of your follow-up appointment. You should be contacted with an appointment within two to three weeks of this referral.

What is lymphoedema?

This is a swelling condition seen when the lymphatic system is damaged or blocked – the swelling is due to a build-up of fluid. Following removal of the lymph nodes and/or radiotherapy, a small number of women may develop lymphoedema of the arm. This can be immediately after surgery, within a few months of surgery or even up to several years later.

Important points about arm and hand care

It is important for you to use your affected arm as normally as possible after surgery and to continue the arm exercises you have been shown for at least six months. In addition:

- Avoid heavy lifting such as shopping bags and vacuum cleaners.
- When sitting in a chair relaxing, raise your arm on a pillow to reduce swelling.
- Offer your other arm for all injections, taking of blood pressure or for any blood tests.
- Wear gloves when washing up.
- Use thimbles when sewing.
- Use an electric shaver for shaving.
- Wear gloves when gardening.
- Avoid getting sunburn. Always wear a high factor sunscreen or block.
- Use an insect repellent.
- Moisturise your hand and arm using hand cream or moisturising cream or lotion to prevent breaks in dry skin.
- Clean any cuts and scrapes well. Look for inflammation, redness and swelling which may be a sign of infection and contact your GP if you get these symptoms.

How can I contact the breast care nurses?

The breast care nurses are available 8.30am to 2.30pm, Monday to Friday on 01384 244065.

They are based at:
Russells Hall Hospital
Dudley
West Midlands
DY1 2HQ

If you have any concerns at the weekend, please ring the Surgical Assessment Unit on 01384 244359.

Can I find out more?

Useful organisations in the local area

Dudley and District Cancer Support Centre

The White House

10, Ednam Road

Dudley

DY1 1JX

01384 231232

www.support4cancer.org.uk

Provides a range of services including information, a helpline, complementary therapies, gentle exercise, yoga and one-to-one counselling. Services and facilities are provided free of charge.

The Dudley Group Breast Cancer Support Group

Meets the first Thursday of every month at 10am to 12noon.

Ring the breast care nurses for more details on 01384 244065.

National support and information organisations

Breast Cancer Care

0808 800 6000

www.breastcancercare.org.uk

Provides telephone information, a helpline, financial or practical help, self-help support groups and nursing care.

If you have any questions, or if there is anything you do not understand about this leaflet, please contact:

The breast care nurses on 01384 244065 8.30am to 4.30pm,
Monday to Friday

Out of these hours, ring the Surgical Assessment Unit on
01384 244359

Russells Hall Hospital switchboard number: 01384 456111

This leaflet can be downloaded or printed from:

<http://dudleygroup.nhs.uk/services-and-wards/>

If you have any feedback on this patient information leaflet,
please email patient.information@dgh.nhs.uk

This leaflet can be made available in large print, audio version and in other languages, please call 0800 073 0510.

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此宣传单可提供大字版本、音频版本和其它语言版本，请拨打电话：0800 073 0510。

Ulotka dostępna jest również w dużym druku, wersji audio lub w innym języku. W tym celu zadzwoń pod numer 0800 073 0510.

ਇਹ ਪਰਚਾ ਵੱਡੇ ਅੱਖਰਾਂ، ਬੋਲ ਕੇ ਰੀਕਾਰਡ ਕੀਤਾ ਹੋਇਆ ਅਤੇ ਦੂਸਰੀਆਂ ਭਾਸ਼ਾਵਾਂ ਵਿਚ ਵੀ ਪ੍ਰਾਪਤ ਹੋ ਸਕਦਾ ਹੈ, 0800 073 0510 ਤੇ ਫੋਨ ਕਰੋ ਜੀ।

Aceasta broșura poate fi pusă la dispoziție tipărită cu caractere mari, versiune audio sau în alte limbi, pentru acest lucru va rugăm sunați la 0800 073 0510.

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