

CARING FOR YOURSELF FOLLOWING A TOTAL MASTECTOMY

This fact sheet has general instructions for patients following a total mastectomy. As individual circumstances can vary, it is important that you discuss your post-operative care with us.

Incision

There will be no stitches (sutures) at the surface of your incision. There will be dissolvable sutures under the skin and the incision will be covered with a waterproof dressing. It is best to discuss the positioning and size of your scar with your surgeon as this will vary from patient to patient.

The waterproof dressing will remain in place until you are reviewed in Breast Clinic (usually 12 days later). You may have an added firm dressing over the waterproof dressing. This outer dressing can be removed after 24 hours, leaving the waterproof dressing in place until your review. You will be advised of this if it is needed.

You are able to shower as normal, but are advised to avoid hot showers as they may increase the amount of bruising or swelling.

Once the dressing is removed the suture line will be covered with surgical tape (such as Micropore™; available at any pharmacy). It is recommended you use the tape for six weeks, changing it every five to seven days. This will help to minimise the scar. Rubbing creams and oils into the suture line is discouraged until after this six-week period.

Drain tube

A drain tube will be placed into the wound bed at the time of surgery to remove excess fluid. The surgeon will decide when to remove the drain tube. It will usually remain in place for two to five days until you have less than 50mls of drainage in a 24-hour period. If you are discharged home from hospital with the drain still in place, you will be given instructions to help care for the drain and a nurse will visit you at home to remove it. The tube may be uncomfortable. You may want to take pain relief half an hour before it is removed as the procedure can be painful. When the drain tube is removed the small hole will be closed with a dressing, this must be removed after 48 hours.

Pain

You are likely to have mild to moderate pain or discomfort after surgery. You will be given pain relief tablets and you may take these as required for the first one to two weeks.

Physical activity

A physiotherapist will give you gentle arm exercises to do in the first few weeks following your surgery. Regular gentle exercises is important to reduce the possible complication of a stiff shoulder.

It is important that you avoid heavy physical activity for the first two weeks. For the next four weeks slowly increase your physical activity as you become more comfortable. After six weeks you should be able to resume your normal level of activity. Check with your surgeon before you recommence vigorous exercise or heavy lifting.

Comfort and appearance

While you're encouraged to look at your scar line as soon as you feel ready, it is a very personal journey and one you should feel in control of. The breast care nurse is available to help you do this. It can be helpful to look at photographs of mastectomy scars prior to your surgery to prepare for the change in your appearance. The breast care nurse can assist with this. If you are in a relationship, sharing the pre-surgery preparation and discussion can be helpful in preparing for change.

Following your surgery the breast care nurse will fit you with a post-surgery bra. This bra provides comfort and support and has a pocket within the cup that can hold breast padding if desired. The breast care nurse can show you how to mould the padding into a breast shape that is similar to your natural breast. This can be done initially with the use of a cotton-filled cushion (called a softie). As it is soft and light, it will not put pressure on your scar line. The breast care nurse can also give you information about options for long-term breast shape within your bra.

Wearing a bra with a softie or breast prosthesis is optional. It is safe to wear your bra and softie as soon as you are comfortable. Women wanting to be fitted for a breast prosthesis are advised to do so at six weeks post-surgery, this allows time for any swelling or bruising to settle.

You may feel self-conscious about breast symmetry. If this is the case, asymmetric prints on clothing can be helpful, as can wearing loose or layered clothing or a scarf draped around your neck.

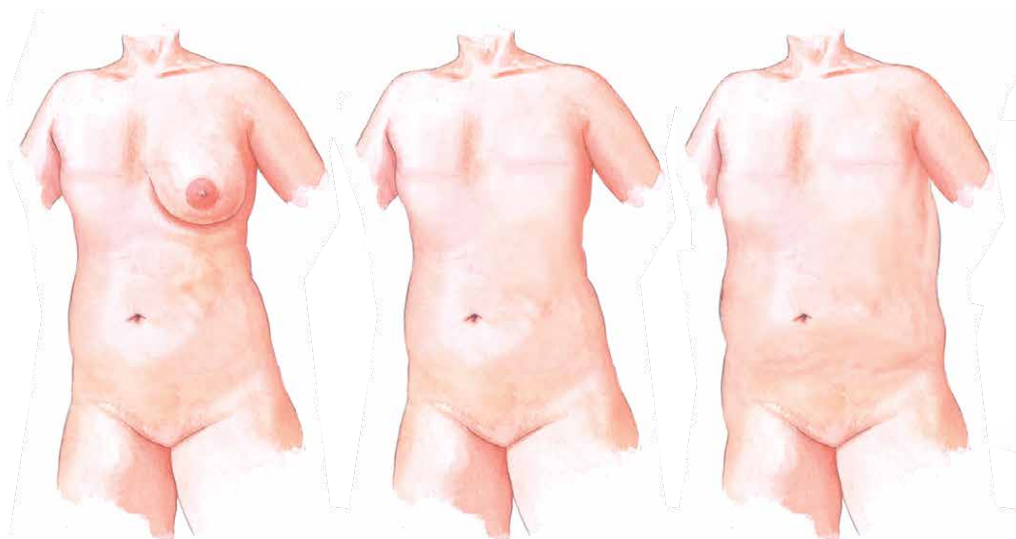


Illustration courtesy of St Andrews Centre for Burns and Plastic Surgery at Broomfield Hospital, Chelmsford UK

Post-operative care

Following surgery it is not unusual to have some swelling or bruising; this should gradually settle over the first few weeks. It is important to contact the hospital if you notice a sudden increase in swelling.

Swelling may be due to the accumulation of fluid at the site of the operation, this is called a seroma. This is a common occurrence; the body will often absorb this fluid over a period of time although the fluid does sometimes need to be drained. If the swelling becomes hard, red, hot or painful please contact the breast care nurse. If drainage is required it can be done easily and painlessly in one of our breast clinics.

Infection is uncommon following surgery; however, it is very important to contact the Breast Service if you have any signs of infection such as fever, or increasing pain, redness or swelling around the wound.

A follow-up breast clinic appointment will be made approximately one to two weeks after surgery.

Scar management

Our aim is minimise any scarring as much as possible. We use different techniques at different times to achieve this:

Week 1 to 6

Micropore is paper tape that provides gentle support to your wound and helps to flatten the scar. The tape is to be worn continuously and changed once a week. You are able to shower with the tape on, but ensure you dry it off afterwards. Do not use any creams or oils on your scars during this time.

Week 6 onwards

Massage and moisturising with a gentle cream (e.g. Cetaphil Moisturising Cream, sorbolene) will help soften the scar and break up any underlying scar tissue. This will encourage the scar to become flatter and smoother. Massage should be done in a firm circular motion along the length of the healed scar. Massage any scars three to four times a day for at least five minutes each time.

6 weeks to 12 months

Silicone gels and sheets can be used to help lock in moisture as well as put pressure on a scar to flatten and soften it. Silicone should only be used on wounds once they are completely healed (normally after 6 weeks, but please check with your doctor/nurse). They can be used for many months; however, most silicone sheets need to be applied gradually in case your skin has an allergic reaction to them.

Some patients occasionally develop lumps in the breast following liposculpture. These lumps are usually due to fat that has not survived the transfer process and formed an oil cyst. Sometimes these lumps may need investigation with radiological tests or biopsy.

For more information

For more information and advice or if you require medical assistance please contact:

Breast Care Nurse

The Royal Women's Hospital
(03) 8345 2000 (switchboard, ask for pager 53100)
(03) 8345 3565 (Monday to Friday during business hours, leave a message if phone unattended)

Breast Care Nurse

The Royal Melbourne Hospital
(03) 9342 8120