

Everything I Wish I Had Known... About Breast Surgery

If you will be having breast surgery as part of your cancer treatment, here are some helpful tips

1. Prepare your home before surgery by placing items you need daily at an easy-to-reach level. (coffee, pills, toothbrush, towels, etc.) Your surgeon will probably impose some restrictions on reaching and the amount of weight you can lift when going home. Be sure to know these limits before your surgery so you can set up your home in advance. Stock up on some favorite foods and drinks, and consider having a cold tasty favorite custard or pudding waiting for you in the refrigerator for when you get home after surgery. Having front-opening pajamas and tops make dressing easier when it's hard to lift your hands over your head. (See: Everything I wish I would have known...**About Going Home After Surgery** in the Tip Sheet Series on our website, www.womenlisten.org)
2. Surgical options for breast cancer involve removing a portion of the breast (lumpectomy) or all of the breast tissue (single or double mastectomy). Your surgeon will consider many factors when determining which procedure you require. Some of the considerations are the size and location of the tumor/cancer cells, genetic, markers, whether the disease has spread to surrounding tissue, whether you are a candidate for radiation and other factors including your preference. The doctor may order genetic testing to determine if you have genetic markers. The results will inform treatment decisions. This is a time to ask questions and express any concerns you have. You will be given information about the type, grade, size and location of the cancer. If you are choosing reconstruction, you may have reconstruction at the same time the tumor is removed or at a later date. Even if you're not sure you want reconstruction, consider talking with the plastic surgeon (the breast surgeon's office can set up this referral). They will talk with you about the options available to you and the risks. It's common to have immediate reconstruction, but some women opt for reconstruction well after the initial surgery, so there is no pressure to have both surgeries at the same time. Also, some women choose not to have reconstruction; it is your choice.
3. Cancer information from your doctor will let you know if the tumor is receptive to hormones: estrogen (ER), progesterone (PR) and Her2/neu (Her2). Your tumor can be positive or negative for each of the hormones, in any combination. These factors will inform your future treatment. In many, but not all, cases you will be asked to make some specific decisions about your treatment plan. During and after surgery, the surgeon will review pathology reports to make sure there are clean margins around the cancer site. In some cases, additional surgeries may be required to achieve that level of success. The surgeon will talk with you about options, pros/cons and preferences for reconstruction.
3. Reports, biopsies, test results and lab information can feel overwhelming. Talk with your doctor if your anxiety level is too high. Adequate sleeping and eating will help nourish your body to prepare for surgery. It is helpful to use a binder to collect and organize the paperwork. It may be comforting and reassuring to have a friend or family member with you at appointments. They can be a second set of ears to listen to what the doctor is saying and help you remember to ask questions. Take notes if you can and/or ask for written information. Preparing yourself mentally can help lead to a greater sense of calmness. Strategies such as meditation, prayer, yoga and mindfulness are helpful. Some women listen to guided meditations for several weeks/days prior to surgery. A downloadable mp3 guided meditation called Successful Surgery was created by social worker, Belleruth Naparstek. This audio has been used in research with positive outcomes. You can listen to it here: <https://www.cc.nih.gov/patientlibrary/healing-streams> or you can purchase/download it: <https://www.hayhouse.com/guided-meditations-to-promote-successful-surgery>.

3. After surgery many recovery rooms are offering coffee to patients to help them wake up for anesthesia. You might wish to ask if that is appropriate for you. When you see the surgeon before surgery, ask them to give the surgery results immediately after surgery to your spouse/caregiver in addition to yourself. You may not remember all of the information when coming out of anesthesia. Have a small travel pillow available to keep under your surgery arm and to use under the car seatbelt for comfort.

a. Drains - You'll probably go home with one or more surgical drains to collect fluid. You will receive instructions on caring for the drains. The drains are attached to your body with a thin, long flexible tubing. Drain care will be explained to you before you leave the hospital/surgery center. Some women like to have a friend/family member help with drain care initially. Your doctor will monitor the amount of fluid you collect from each drain to determine when the drains can be removed, typically 1-2 weeks. You will need something to hold the drain bulbs such as an apron with pockets, hoodie with kangaroo pocket, lanyards with carabiners or a garment made specifically to hold the drains. These websites have several helpful items for purchase <https://www.anaono.com> and <https://www.pinkpepperco.com>. Drains will be removed in the doctor's office, and it is usually painless. You will probably sleep in a recliner or on your back propped with pillows for a period of time after surgery. Make sleeping arrangements ahead of time.

b. Children - If you have young children let them know that you will have a big "owie" so they need to be gentle with you (no body-slam hugs!) Having breast surgery can be an emotional roller coaster. Some women experience a sense of loss and grief, while others feel relieved. Some women are angry and others feel numb and detached. Feelings are not "one-size fits all," and they can change quickly and catch you off guard. Try to remember that all feelings are valid. However, if your feelings become so overwhelming that they affect your day-to-day functioning, talk with your doctor about a referral to a mental health professional. This is a time to be gentle with yourself. Research suggests that joining a support group like Women LISTEN, Inc. encourages positive outcomes for patients. Many women find that listening to and talking with other women cancer survivors offers hope, useful information and emotional support.

c. Body changes - The first look at your incisions after the coverings are removed can be jarring. Remember that your body is still healing and the appearance will improve overtime. Bruising, redness, discoloration and swelling are all common. You may experience nerve pains/zingers for several weeks or months after surgery. They are normal and will subside as you heal. You will probably go home with some type of compression bra or wrap. It may feel comforting to have compression so find out how long it can be worn. Depending on your situation, you may want information about breast forms, prostheses and bras. These websites offer a lot of options: <https://everyyou.com/> and <https://www.amoena.com/us-en/>.

D. Scars and PT - Using paper tape, 3M Micropore tape, on scars can help promote healing and decrease hypertonic scars. Research suggests it works as well as or better than more expensive silicone products, oils and creams. Ask the surgeon if the tape is appropriate for you. Also, remember to ask about scar massage and other types of body work. If you haven't already done so, request the required referral from your surgeon to an oncology rehabilitation program. The Physical Therapists (PT) will design a program of exercises to help you regain strength, range of motion and balance. They will monitor you for lymphedema and cording, which can occur after breast surgery when lymph nodes are removed. Additional information on these issues is available on our website: Everything I Wish I Would Have Known... **About Lymphedema**.

Additional information is available in our **Everything I Wish I Would Have Known...** series on the website.