

## Everything I wish I had known about... **Going Home after Surgery**

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

1. Caregiver Support is an important consideration when caregivers are living with you. If they typically count on you for specific tasks, discuss (well before surgery) ways they can manage their own needs while you are recovering. Encourage them to take breaks and find other ways to relax and replenish their energy. Communicate with them specifically about what kinds of support and help you will need as you heal. Ask them for their understanding and patience as you recover.
2. Setting up the house prior to surgery is very helpful to you and your caregiver. Have some meals prepped and in the refrigerator/freezer or make plans for meals for at least two weeks. Try to de-clutter areas where you'll be spending time. Bathrooms, bedrooms and meal prep areas should be cleaned and sanitized. Stock toilet paper, tissues, period products and other needed paper items. Place tissues and an emesis basin on the night stand. Have an extra roll of toilet paper within reach. Consider sleeping arrangements (i.e., recliner or bed with pillow props) for the first week or so and showering/bathing needs, e.g. seat, sprayer, and what help you will need. Have comfortable pjs, robe and slippers. Be sure they are items you can put on and take off easily, as you may have some range-of-motion limitations. Keep a step stool handy for reaching higher objects.
3. Medications will have specific instructions and schedules to follow. Getting the prescriptions filled in advance will help you set up a medication schedule. Some medications may cause dizziness and you will have driving restrictions, so you'll need to plan ahead for appointments. Other medications need to be taken with food. Be sure to take over-the-counter pain relievers only if prescribed by the doctor, and follow the specific instructions. Ask the doctor, in advance, what you need to monitor and when to call with concerns. Ask about signs of infection.
4. Surgical drains may be placed during some surgeries. The doctor will give you specific directions on skin care, wound care and drain care. It is important to follow the instructions. The drains will need quite a bit of attention after surgery. The length of placement varies from woman to woman, depending on the amount of fluid your body produces. A "drain apron" can be made using a pocketed waist garment worn to hold the drains. Some women use inexpensive waist project/nail belts from Lowe's or Home Depot. Other women design their own or purchase vests/garments made specifically to hold surgical drains through online sites such as <https://www.anaono.com> and <https://www.pinkpepperco.com>. Lanyards with carabiner clips or zip up jackets with interior pockets are other drain holder ideas. Mastectomy shirts or any large shirt, like a men's dress shirt, can be modified with interior pockets sewn in to hold drains, and some organizations make and send them out free to breast cancer patients. Do an internet search – one organization that sends these out currently in Pockets of Hope, <https://wwwpocketsofhope.com>.
5. Recovery will be aided by rest and refueling. Sleeping and getting enough rest may help healing. Engaging in quiet restorative ventures such as journaling, meditation, coloring can reduce anxiety and promote resting. Crafting or other creative activities can keep your mind engaged in positivity. Increasing protein intake, eating fruits and vegetables and keeping hydrated are essential for your recovery. Stretching and completing the physical activities prescribed by your doctor and/or physical therapist (PT) will help restore energy and range of motion. Be aware of any lifting restrictions imposed by your surgeon. When going for walks, start out with short outings and gradually increase duration and intensity. Enrolling in an Oncology Rehabilitation program can help you regain strength and mobility. Ask your doctor to write an order before surgery, if possible, so you can benefit from a pre-surgery PT consultation. Other recovery tools include: compression garments; seatbelt pillows/padding; small underarm pillows (breast surgery); prosthetics. The American Cancer Society has a great resource for products. <https://www.everyonu.com>

6. Other things to consider are: when/how to inform family members, kids and friends; transportation needs for appointments; children's schedules; meals from co-workers and friends; riding in a car (avoid potholes and sudden stops); and what emotional support you need. Research suggests that support groups positively affect patient outcomes. Many women find that joining a support group like Women LISTEN, Inc. offers valuable insights and information from other cancer patients.

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

Updated August 2025

[www.womenlisten.org](http://www.womenlisten.org)