Royal United Hospitals Bath
NHS Foundation Trust

Post -surgery information

Mastectomy, sentinel node biopsy or axillary node dissection with breast reconstruction

The information in this leaflet is to aid your recovery from 2 weeks after your operation.

Care of your wound

Keep your reconstructed breast warm for the first 4 weeks using a towel/blanket or shawl. This will aid wound healing. Please do not use hot water bottles or hot packs for this, as you will have a loss of sensation in your reconstructed breast and there is a risk of burns. For this reason, it is also advisable to avoid holding hot drinks close to your reconstructed breast.

Once your dressings have been removed, you may shower or have a waist high bath. Wash your wound with mild soap or just water and pat dry gently with a clean towel. Please do not lie back or soak in a bath for at least six weeks, as this may cause the wound to soften and open up.

If you have surgical glue on your wound, please do not pick at it. The glue will gradually flake away as you bathe.

After 4 weeks, you may start to moisturise your wounds each day. Use an unperfumed body lotion or if you prefer, commercial scar oil can be used after 6 weeks. Gently massage your chosen product into the scar, using a small circular motion. This will help to soften and smooth the scar.

You may use a roll on antiperspirant/deodorant after 2 weeks and a spray after 6.

If you experience any of the following, contact your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist on 01225 824057

- **New swelling**, **heat, discharge**, **rash or redness around the wound site**
- **You feel hot and shivery or have a temperature**.

Support bra - what to wear

Please wear your support bra day and night for at least 6 weeks after your operation. Remove for an hour whilst you bathe.

To reduce the risk of infection having two bras would be appropriate, one to wash and one to wear. Your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist will advise you on bras after the 6 week period is over.

You may feel more comfortable for the first few weeks after your operation, in loose fitting nightwear and clothing with front fastenings.

Discomfort and pain

Everyone's experience is different, but it is common to have a degree of discomfort, swelling, bruising and pain for several weeks following your operation.

- We recommend that you continue to take pain relief regularly to keep yourself topped up to prevent breakthrough pain. This will allow you to move freely without discomfort, do your arm exercises and can help give you a better night's sleep.
- It is common to experience sudden short shooting pains and discomfort for no reason. This is the nerves settling down and should improve after a few weeks. If it continues, please contact your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist who may advise a different type of pain relief.
- You may also experience phantom 'breast' pain/sensation following your operation. This will settle after a few months.
- You will experience complete or partial numbness, extra sensitivity or tingling to your armpit, upper arm and reconstructed breast. These sensations are very common, some will be permanent, but you may notice others improve over time.

Posture

It is important to look after your posture following your operation. It is common to feel that you need to be protective of your wounds; however, it is vital to try and sit, stand and walk normally. This will help you avoid getting stiffness in your back, shoulder, neck and elbow and limit any future problems.

Here is a simple exercise to help your posture. Try to do this little and often during the day and continue until your arm and shoulder movement has returned to normal.

Posture correction exercise

- Stand tall, imagining you have a string pulling you up from the middle of your head
- Gently lower your shoulders down towards the floor
- Gently take your shoulders backwards, bringing your shoulder blades together
- Hold for 5 seconds then relax. Try to repeat this 10 times.

Arm and shoulder exercises

Firstly, remember not to lift your elbows above shoulder height for the first 2-3 weeks after your operation, or as advised by your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist or Consultant Surgeon.

All exercises should be done within the limits of pain. It is common to feel a pulling sensation during the exercises and temporary discomfort afterwards. Gentle exercise is important to aid healing and to reduce complications.

You will be advised by your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist, **when** to move onto the more **advanced exercises** (nos.**7-9**) from the leaflet '**Exercises after breast cancer surgery**' which you are already working from.

If you wish, you can also access an audio version of the exercise leaflet at www.breastcancernow.org (found in the publications section)

We advise you to continue the exercises fully for at least 6 weeks after your operation, until you have regained your normal arm and shoulder movement.

After this, we recommend continuing the exercises daily to maintain movement.

Cording

After having lymph nodes removed, you can sometimes develop a tight feeling when you stretch your arm out or to the side. It can feel like cords or strings in your arm or armpit. This is called cording and can happen days or weeks after your operation.

Cording is not harmful, but may feel tight and make you want to hold your arm protectively. It is important to try not to do this. Rarely, cording can also appear in the abdominal tissues and may pull when you lift your arm.

Gentle stretching during your arm and shoulder exercises and light massage of the 'cords' should gradually improve the tightness. It is important to continue the exercises 3 times a day as advised in the leaflet, until your full movement returns and the tightness improves.

If you have concerns about cording please contact your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist for advice.

Fluid collection (seroma)

It is common to experience some swelling around your wounds and reconstructed breast in the first few weeks after your operation.

This natural collection of fluid is called a seroma, which the body will gradually re- absorb.

The seroma is not harmful, but can become uncomfortable or put pressure on the wound. If this happens, please call your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist in order to arrange for the fluid to be

drained in the Breast Unit. We aim to drain the fluid no more than weekly, as doing this more frequently encourages the fluid to re-form.

If you have fluid drained, then please **do not** do your arm exercises for the rest of that day as this will reduce the risk of the seroma re filling. Re-start your exercises the following day. Try to reduce repetitive arm actions that may encourage the seroma to re fill e.g. computer keyboard work.

Over time, old seroma fluid will become firm and the body will gradually break it down.

A seroma is not lymphoedema and does not cause it.

Prevention of lymphoedema

Here is some helpful advice which is important to follow for the rest of your life:

To reduce your risk of lymphoedema

- Avoid carrying or moving heavy weights with your affected arm e.g. heavy shopping, wheelie bins, suitcases or full bucket of water/watering can.
- Avoid steam rooms, saunas and very hot baths
- Avoid applying hot packs and having deep tissue massage over your upper back, chest wall, neck and affected arm.
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Wear a well- fitting, non- wired bra with wide adjustable straps

Protect your skin against damage, cuts and grazes

- Avoid having injections, blood tests, infusions or blood pressures taken from the affected arm. **However, this does not apply in an emergency situation.**
- Use insect repellent to reduce the risk of bites
- Use high factor sunscreen to protect from sunburn
- Wear oven gloves for cooking and gloves when gardening
- Be careful to avoid cuts when handling sharp objects
- Avoid pet scratches and bites on the affected side
- Use an electric razor or depilatory cream to remove underarm hair on the affected side
- Keep your affected arm and hand well moisturised
- Avoid wearing clothing or jewellery that is too tight on the affected arm

If you have a cut, graze, scratch or insect bite on the affected side, clean it well, apply antiseptic and cover with a plaster. Observe the area and if it shows signs of infection i.e. redness, swelling, inflammation or pain, please contact your GP or Nurse Practitioner that day to obtain a 2 week course of antibiotics.

Gradually increase periods of activity over many weeks and take regular periods of rest. This will allow your lymph system to adjust to increases in activity. If your arm aches during periods of activity, it is telling you that you have done too much and need to rest.

If you notice feelings of heaviness, tightness or swelling in your affected arm or hand, then please contact your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist, as these are signs that you may have developed lymphoedema.

Other advice

- Only do what you feel you have the energy to do. It is tempting to resume your normal activities but this can add to general fatigue and delay your recovery.
- Avoid any lifting or repetitive movements for at least 6 weeks and introduce tasks such as shopping, vacuuming and hanging out washing gradually after this.
- Eating a healthy, well balanced diet and keeping well hydrated will aid wound healing and reduce the risk of constipation.
- Avoid driving for at least 4-6 weeks, depending on the type of reconstruction you have had. Your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist will advise on this. You need to be able to comfortably wear a seatbelt and do an emergency stop before starting to drive again.
- Please check with your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist before going swimming because of the risk of infection.
- It is normal to feel low in mood after surgery. Many different emotions arise which can cause confusion and mood swings. There is no right or wrong way to feel. If you are feeling low and would like to speak about your feelings then please contact us.
- You can resume sexual activity as soon as you feel able, however give yourself time and do not expect too much.

Tissue expander

When your wound has healed, your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist will arrange to see you to commence the inflation process and will continue to see you every 1-2 weeks until completed. Continue to wear your support bra until advised otherwise.

TRAM flap

Please continue to wear your support pants/garment day and night for 6 weeks.

Your ward physiotherapist will advise you on abdominal exercises.

Bra advice

RUH bra fitting service: please contact Karen Read, Support Worker, on 01225 824057 for an appointment

There are many high street stores that stock post- surgery bras but below are details of websites that you may like to look at and purchase bras from.

www.amoena.co.uk

www.nicolajane.com

www.anita.com

www.silima.co.uk

www.trulifebreastcare.com

Useful organisations

Breast Cancer Now
Fifth Floor, Ibex House,
42-47 Minories,
London.EC3N 1DY
Helpline 0808 800 6000
www.breastcancernow.org

Penny Brohn Cancer Care
Chapel Pill Lane, Pill,
Bristol.BS20 0HH
01275 370 100

www.pennybrohn.org.uk

We Hear You
Free professional counselling for those affected by cancer or life threatening Illness For adults, teenagers+ children.
1st Floor, Frome Town Hall,
Christchurch St. West, Frome.
BA11 1EB
01373 455255
www.wehearyou.org.uk/

Macmillan Cancer Support
89 Albert Embankment, London.
SE1 7UQ
0808 808 0000
www.macmillan.org.uk

Local support groups

Breast of Friends, Combe Grove, Bath. Contact Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist for further details: 01225 824057 or ruh-tr.breastcarenurses@nhs.net

Keeping Abreast Bristol &Bath Support Group (support for those that have had a mastectomy, are considering reconstruction or have had reconstruction for cancer or a hereditary breast cancer gene. **Regular evening meetings at : The Key Centre, 2,Charlton Road,Keynsham.BS31 1DX.Call 01603 819113 or info@keepingabreast.org.uk for details and dates for the year.**

Breast Care Swimming Group: Meets on Mondays (except bank holidays) at Kingswood School, Lansdown, Bath, from 6.45 to 7.30pm.Conact Maggie via email:ken_nicholson_uk@yahoo.co.uk

Contact details

Breast Clinical Nurse Specialists: 01225 824057 (answerphone)

Available Monday to Friday 8-6pm ruh-tr.breastcarenurses@nhs.net

Breast Unit reception: 01225 825881 or 01225 825882

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01225 428331 | www.ruh.nhs.uk

If you would like this leaflet in email form, large print, braille or another language, please contact the Patient Support and Complaints team on 01225 825656.

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