



Northumbria Healthcare
NHS Foundation Trust

Your Guide to Mastectomy

Issued by the Breast Team





This leaflet explains the procedure of Mastectomy, and your aftercare.

What is a mastectomy?

Mastectomy is an operation to remove all or nearly all of the breast tissue. When it is carried out to remove cancer, it is usual that one or all of the lymph glands in your axilla (arm-pit) are removed at the same time. This will allow the doctors to know if there is any cancer in the glands and may influence the decision regarding the kind of additional treatment you may be offered.

If you have chosen, or been recommended to have a mastectomy, there will be a number of questions and comments you may have. In this booklet we have tried to offer information and advice about the time that you will spend in hospital.

Please do not hesitate to ask your Breast Care Nurse for further information or to discuss any queries you may have.

So what happens now?

Your pre-admission assessment visit gives the Pre-Assessment Nurse time to examine you and to arrange any further test that may be necessary. These may include blood tests, a chest X-ray, and possibly a tracing of your heart. None of these are painful and they are all routine.

The operation will be carried out under general anaesthetic. As with all general anaesthetics you will not be able to eat or drink anything for a few hours before surgery. The Pre-Assessment Nurse or Breast Care Nurse will give you details of this and your hospital admission.

Along with the usual toiletries you may like to bring a couple of cotton night-dresses or pyjamas, preferably with loose sleeves. You will not need to wear a bra whilst you are in hospital but you may probably want to wear one when you get dressed to go home. If you are worried about wearing a bra because of your stitches then bring a full length slip, camisole top or something similar into hospital.

Your hospital stay

The Anaesthetist and Surgeon will visit you before the operation, and you will be able to ask any questions at this stage, it is important that you understand what is going to be done. The physiotherapist may also visit you to show you some deep breathing and arm exercises to make you more comfortable after your operation.

Before your operation you will be asked to undress and put on a cotton operation gown.

You will need to remove contact lenses and all jewellery except your wedding ring. You will then be taken to the theatre and given a full anaesthetic. On waking up you will be in the theatre recovery area, and then you will soon be brought back to the ward.

Wound care

At first you will have a dressing on your wound. However, if after a couple of days you feel comfortable, a dressing is not necessary. You may feel uncomfortable at the idea of looking at your scar for the first time. It may look bruised at first but should fade to a neat 'line' within a few months. There is no right or wrong time to look at your wound – you will choose the right time for you. However, when you do touch your wound it is quite common that initially it will feel uneven.

Following your operation you may have one-two suction drains coming from your wound. These drains are to remove old blood and other fluids and will help to reduce bruising and swelling around your wound. They are usually removed 1-7 days following your operation.

Your District Nursing Team will manage and remove the drain when appropriate.

The stitches in your wound are dissolvable, in which case they do not have to be removed.

It is normal to have ‘pins and needles’ and some discomfort across your chest and down your arm. This may be due to disturbance to the nerves in that area during surgery. In most cases full sensation will return, but this can take some months. Occasionally there may be an area of permanent numbness, but this should not affect the use of your arm.

Skin care

You may bathe or shower as usual, gently pat the scar dry with a clean towel. It is advisable not to use any sprays, bubble baths, or aerosol deodorants on or near the wound for about two weeks following your operation as they may cause stinging, however you may use roll on deodorant.

If you notice any redness, swelling or if you develop a discharge from your wound please contact your GP, or the ward on which you were treated for advice. Please refer to the additional leaflet ‘Your guide to recovery from breast surgery’. Wound infections do not happen often, but when they do a course of antibiotics is usually all that is required.

Pain control

You may find that you experience some pain and discomfort following your operation. Please don't hesitate to ask for painkillers when you are in hospital. Simple painkillers such as paracetamol should relieve any pain when you get home. Be careful to read the instruction label carefully.

You may find it beneficial to take regular painkillers in the first couple of weeks. If so beware of constipation which is a side effect of painkillers. Regular fruit in your diet and increasing the amount of fluids you drink should help to prevent this.

Moving your arm

You will see the physiotherapist who will teach you a range of arm exercises and give you an exercise leaflet. It is very important that you follow the physiotherapist's advice and practise the exercises at frequent intervals.

The purpose of arm exercise is to avoid any arm or shoulder stiffness developing. It is tempting to over protect your arm and shoulder, but this can delay your movement returning. The exercises are to help you regain the range of arm movements that you had before your operation. Continue these exercises at home and return to full use of your arm as instructed. Doing your exercises 'little and often' is probably the best advice.

Do not be alarmed if you ache or feel a pulling sensation during or after exercising. This will ease off as you practice your exercises.

Breast prosthesis

Before you leave hospital the ward nurse will offer to fit you with a temporary breast prosthesis, (known as a 'softie'). This is a soft foam-filled breast shape that is designed to be comfortable even when worn next to your new wound. It is held in place by your bra but you may prefer not to wear it until you feel more comfortable.

At about six weeks following your operation, provided your wound has healed well, your breast care nurse will offer to arrange the fitting of your permanent prosthesis. However, if you are undergoing a course of radiotherapy following your mastectomy it is advisable not to wear a permanent prosthesis until the radiotherapy treatment has been completed.

There is a wide selection of permanent silicone-filled breast prostheses available free on the NHS. A female prosthetic fitter or nurse will be able to discuss with you any special requirements regarding your prosthesis, eg swimming, so take your time and feel free to try as many as you want to.

It is not necessary to buy new bras unless you want to. If you do, it is advisable to be properly measured and fitted to ensure you are wearing the right size bra. A trained fitter can also advise you what style of bra may be appropriate. It is also possible to have pockets to hold your prosthesis fitted into your bra or swimsuit. Your breast prosthesis will usually last two to three years, but if you have any problems with your prosthesis please contact the breast care nurse or orthotics officer at the hospital.

Every woman who has had a mastectomy operation should be offered the opportunity to have breast reconstruction. This would entail further surgery and can take place some months following the mastectomy or at the same time. If you would like to find out some more about reconstructive surgery please speak to your

surgeon or breast care nurse. Your surgeon can refer you to a plastic surgeon who can tell you exactly what can be achieved and how they would do the operation.

Your feelings after a mastectomy

Immediately after your operation you will probably feel very well, possibly much better than you had expected, but you may find that intermittently you may experience periods of feeling low. These emotional swings are quite common. Sometimes the reassurance of family and friends is all that is needed. If not, you may find it helpful to talk to either your breast care nurse or other women who have been through the same experience.

Your first response to losing a breast may understandably be grief. Just as after a bereavement, you need to allow yourself time to mourn the loss. Well-meaning people telling you to ‘cheer up’ or ‘pull yourself together’ may not be helpful. The breast care nurse at the hospital will be a supportive person you can talk to about your feelings at this time, as well as offering practical help and advice.

Follow-up appointments

On discharge from hospital, you will be given an appointment to return to see your surgeon about 7-10 days later. At this appointment you should be given the final results of your operation and if any further treatment is recommended this will be discussed then.

You will continue to be seen at the outpatient department at regular intervals. You will also be asked to attend for a mammogram X-ray for 5 years or until you reach the age of 50.

Breast awareness

Even though you will be having a regular check-up it is still advisable to be breast aware. This involves looking at and feeling your breast, scar and both armpits for any change. By doing this regularly you will know what is normal for you.

For further information your GP, district or practice nurse or breast care nurse can help.

We hope that this booklet is useful to you and has given you a brief idea about what to expect. If it has raised any queries or if you would like to discuss any aspect further please contact your breast care nurse.

Treatment Plan

Surgery:

Date of Pre Assessment:

Date of Sentinel Lymph Node Isotope Injection:

Admission for surgery:

Date of surgery:

Physiotherapist assessment:

Other information:

Support Contact Numbers

Breast Care Nurse

North Tyneside General Hospital
(0191) 293 4183

Breast Care Nurse

Wansbeck General Hospital
(01670) 529319

Breast Care Nurse

Hexham General Hospital
(01434) 655386

Breast Practitioners

Wansbeck General Hospital
01670 529636

Breast Cancer Care Helpline

0808 800 6000 or website: www.breastcancercare.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Relief Helpline

0845 601 6161 or website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Breast Care Campaign

www.breastcare.co.uk

Alternative Formats

If you would like a copy of this information in large print, another language, audio tape or other format please call the Contact Centre on **03 44 811 8118**

Other sources of information

NHS 111

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx

NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)

www.nice.org.uk

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Freephone: **0800 032 0202**

Text: 01670 511098

Email: northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk

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General Enquiries **03 44 811 8111**

www.northumbria.nhs.uk

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