



**Northumbria Healthcare**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Your guide to recovery from breast surgery

Issued by the Breast Team



This leaflet is to provide you with information and practical advice following your stay in hospital. If you have any queries at this time please do not hesitate to contact your breast care nurse, district or practice nurse or GP.

## **Wound care**

After about two weeks you can return to using soaps and toiletries as normal. If you still need a light dressing at this stage then your district or practice nurse will advise you.

## **What is a Seroma?**

Approximately one in three patients who have had a breast operation will develop a seroma, even if a surgical drain has been used. A seroma is a build-up of blood-stained fluid which can collect under the skin after a breast operation or when the glands have been removed from the axilla (armpit). Small seromas will usually disappear within about a month and no treatment is needed. Only if the seroma is large and causing discomfort or problems in using the arm will treatment be needed, in which case the fluid can then easily be drained by a doctor or nurse using a fine needle. This procedure may be repeated several times but is not something to be concerned about. For further information please contact the ward on which you were treated or your breast care nurse.

## **Housework**

Following your breast surgery you should be able to return to most of your usual activities within about two to six weeks, but this varies from person to person. Light work can be resumed soon after returning home. Some activities such as ironing or using a vacuum cleaner may take a little longer. It is often easier to start with a small amount of work and gradually increase this.

## Lifting

A kettle three-quarters full of water is about the heaviest weight you should lift within the first two weeks after your operation. You will be less likely to feel any discomfort if you use both hands to lift.

## Rest

It is important that you set aside time each day to rest. This may be having an early night, late morning or an afternoon nap. Don't be surprised if you feel tired. As well as having an operation and a general anaesthetic, you have been through a very stressful time, so it is understandable if you feel worn out. Don't be afraid to take some 'time out' for yourself to rest your mind as well as your body.

## Driving

You may want to wait a couple of weeks until the strength in your arms has returned before you begin driving again. When driving, if your seat belt causes irritation you can buy an adapter to go on your seatbelt. This will ease the tightness of the belt.

Please note – it is advisable to check with your motor insurance company following your operation as some companies state a time limit for driving after an operation. So it is worth checking to ensure you are legally covered.

## Sexual activities

You can resume your sex life as soon as you wish following your breast surgery. Many women are worried that they will be less feminine and less desirable after breast surgery and that their partner will no longer find them attractive. Experience has shown however that few relationships are affected by this operation.

Sometimes a woman may feel she is no longer attractive because her partner hesitates to touch her. The real reason is more likely to be that her partner is afraid of hurting her. Couples need to talk over their fears and feelings openly and honestly as soon as they feel able to after surgery.

## **Sport**

Most sports can be resumed after a couple of weeks but please check with your surgeon or breast care nurse. If your chosen sport involves strenuous upper body movements (for example golf, swimming, aerobics, and racquet sports) then it is probably advisable to recommence these activities gradually about one month after your operation.

## **Returning to work**

You may feel quite tired at first but depending on how you feel and the type of work you do, you may feel able to return to work usually about six to eight weeks after your operation. However if you need further treatment this may be delayed.

## **Diet**

A well balanced, healthy diet will aid wound healing.

## **Follow-up appointments**

On discharge from hospital, you will usually be given an appointment to return to see your surgeon about one to two weeks 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 each year.

# Potential Lymphoedema

Lymphoedema is swelling of a limb caused by the accumulation of lymph fluid. Lymph fluid normally flows freely through the body.

Sometimes after you have had an operation the lymph fluid does not flow as freely. If this happens you may notice your arm swelling. Rings may become tighter and your arm may feel heavier.

A little swelling immediately after surgery is quite normal and usually subsides, but the majority of women do not go on to develop lymphoedema.

Taking sensible care of your arm/hand may help to reduce the risks of developing lymphoedema in the future.

The following precautions may help protect you from developing lymphoedema.

- Arm exercises should be continued, to maintain the movement of your arm, hand and shoulder. Please see the leaflet 'Your guide to exercise after breast surgery' which you have been given.
- Try to avoid moving heavy furniture, or carrying heavy shopping bags with your affected arm.
- Offer your other arm for injections, taking of blood pressure or giving blood. Most health care professionals will make every effort not to use the arm on the same side as the surgery, but occasionally it may be unavoidable.
- To protect your hands, wear gloves for gardening or when using harsh detergents.
- Take care when manicuring your nails and when shaving under the affected arm.
- Use a thimble when sewing.

- Try to keep your skin in good condition by regularly using a moisturiser. Use a good protective cream when sunbathing to avoid sunburn.
- Cuts or abrasions on the affected arm/hand should be cleansed well and antiseptic applied.

If you are concerned that you may have developed lymphedema please contact your GP, surgeon, oncologist or your breast care nurse for advice.

## **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.

# 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](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

## **Macmillan Cancer Relief Helpline**

0845 601 6161 or website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

## **Breast Care Campaign**

[www.breastcare.co.uk](http://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](http://www.nhs.uk/pages/homepage.aspx)

### NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)

[www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

Freephone: **0800 032 0202**

Text: 01670 511098

Email: [northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk](mailto:northoftynepals@nhct.nhs.uk)

### Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

General Enquiries **03 44 811 8111**

[www.northumbria.nhs.uk](http://www.northumbria.nhs.uk)

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