

Your guide to recovery from breast surgery

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.

Q1. How do I look after my wound?

A1. The stitches in your wound may be dissolvable in which case they do not need to be removed. If they are not dissolvable they will need to be removed 10-14 days after your operation. The ward staff will make arrangements with the District or Practice Nurse to do this and this information will be given to you before you leave hospital.

You may bathe and shower as usual, gently pat the area 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 after your operation as they may cause stinging. 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.

Q2. What is a seroma?

A2. 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 a month and no treatment is needed. Only if a 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. Please refer to the additional leaflet 'Your guide to seromas'.

Q3. How quickly can I return to normal activities?

A3.

- 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. You can gradually increase the weight as you develop more strength in your arm.

- Rest. 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 seatbelt 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. 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 people are worried that they will be 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 people may feel that they are no longer attractive because their partner hesitates to touch them. The real reason is more likely to be that their partner is afraid of hurting them. 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, 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.

Q4. What is lymphoedema?

A4. Lymphoedema is swelling of a limb caused by the build up 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 that your arm swells. Rings may become tighter and your arm may feel heavier.

A little swelling immediately after surgery is quite normal and usually subsides. The majority of people do not go on to develop lymphoedema.

Taking sensible care of your arm and hand may help to reduce the risks of developing lymphoedema in the future. The following precautions may also help.

- 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 the Physiotherapist gave you.
- Try to avoid moving heavy furniture or carrying heavy shopping etc 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 cleaned well and antiseptic applied.

If you are concerned that you may have developed lymphoedema please contact your GP, Surgeon, Oncologist or Breast Care Nurse for advice.

Q5. What about follow-up appointments?

A5. On discharge from hospital, you will usually be given an appointment to return to see your Surgeon about 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 may also be asked to attend for a mammogram x-ray each year.

Q6. What should I look out for?

A6. Even though you will be having regular check-ups it is still advisable to be breast aware. This involves looking at and feeling your breasts, scar and both armpits for any changes. 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.

Contact details:

Your Breast Care Nurse:

Tel: 0191 2820207 / 8.
Office Hours: 8.30am-4.30pm

Email:

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Further information is also available on the hospital website:
www.newcastle-hospitals.org.uk

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