

Post - surgery information

Mastectomy and sentinel node biopsy or axillary lymph node dissection

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

Care of your wound

When your wounds have been checked and stitches trimmed in the Breast Clinic, you can shower normally or take a waist high bath. Use a mild soap or just water to wash your wound for the first 6 weeks. Please do not lie back and soak in the bath for at least 6 weeks, as this can soften the wound and cause it to open. Pat your wound dry with a clean towel.

If you have surgical glue on your wound, please do not pick at it. The glue will gradually lift away as you shower/bathe. It can take several weeks to go completely.

After about 4 weeks, you can start to moisturise your scar every day using an unperfumed body lotion or if you prefer, a commercial scar oil can be applied after 6 weeks. Gently massage your chosen product into the scar each day, 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 please contact your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist on 01225 824057

- **Swelling, heat, redness or rash to the wound site**
- **If you feel hot and shivery or have a temperature**
- **There is new discharge from the wound**
- **A build-up of fluid (seroma), that is uncomfortable**



Fluid collection (Seroma)

It is common to experience swelling around your wound or in your armpit after your operation. This natural collection of fluid is called a seroma and the body will gradually re-absorb it.

A seroma is not harmful, but can become uncomfortable or put pressure on the wound. If this happens, please contact your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist in order to have the excess fluid drained in the Breast Unit. If this occurs at the weekend, it is safe to leave it until the Monday. We aim to not drain the seroma more often than once a week, as this can encourage the fluid to re-form. It is common to need to have the seroma drained several times before it settles.

If you have a seroma drained, please leave your arm exercises for the rest of that day and restart them the day after.

Try to reduce repetitive arm actions that may encourage the seroma to refill more quickly, such as vacuuming, sweeping or computer keyboard work.

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

A seroma is not lymphoedema and does not cause it.

Discomfort and pain

- It is important to continue to take pain relief regularly until you can move your arm without causing pain.
- Pain relief will allow you to move freely, do your arm exercises and can help give you a better night's sleep.
- It is common to feel sudden short shooting pains and discomfort over your wound or in the armpit for no reason. These are the nerves coming back to life and should settle in a few weeks. If this persists, contact the Breast Clinical Nurse Specialists, who may suggest a course of pain relief for nerve pain.
- You may be aware that you have altered sensation, numbness or tingling over your healing wounds, your armpit or upper arm. This is very normal and can improve with time, but some changes may be permanent.
- It is also common to experience 'phantom' breast pain following your operation. This may take a few months to settle.



What to wear

You may feel more comfortable in loose fitting, front fastening clothing and nightwear for several weeks after your operation.

A supportive, non-wired bra with adjustable straps is best to wear. Ideally, to reduce the risk of infection, two bras would be appropriate, one to wash and one to wear.

You will have been given a temporary prosthesis or 'softy' to wear during the first six weeks after your operation, whilst your wounds heal.

Your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist can give you advice on bras and breast prosthetics (**how to get your permanent prosthetic from us is on page 5/6 of this leaflet**).

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 shoulder, neck and elbow and limit future problems.

Try to do the following simple exercise little and often through the day and continue until your arm and shoulder movement has returned to normal.

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

Arm exercises

Two weeks after your operation (as long as your wound has healed) we advise you to move onto the advanced arm exercises (7-9) from the **Exercises after breast cancer surgery** leaflet already given to you.

Please complete the whole sheet (1-9) three times a day for at least six weeks, until your full arm and shoulder movement has returned. After this, we recommend continuing the arm exercises daily to maintain movement. If you wish, you can download an audio version of the arm exercises at:

www.breastcancer.org/information-support (found in the publications section)

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 weeks after your surgery.

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 tissue and may pull when you lift your arm.

Continue to do your arm exercises three times a day as advised in the leaflet and gently massage the cords until the tightness improves. Contact your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist for further advice if the cording does not improve.

Care of your hand, arm, chest wall and 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 and moving heavy weights with the affected arm e.g. heavy shopping, wheelie bins, suitcases or full buckets of water/watering cans
- Avoid steam rooms, saunas and very hot baths
- Avoid applying hot packs to and having deep tissue massage over the treated area, particularly the neck, shoulders, upper back, chest wall 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 pressure taken from the affected arm. **However, this does not apply in an emergency situation.**
- Use insect repellent to reduce the risk of bites
- Wear oven gloves for cooking and gloves when gardening
- Be careful to avoid cuts when using anything sharp in your hands
- Use an electric razor or depilatory cream when removing underarm hair on the affected side
- Keep your arm and chest wall on the affected side well moisturised
- Use high factor sunscreen to protect from sunburn
- Avoid wearing clothing or jewellery that is too tight on the affected arm.
- Avoid pet scratches and bites on the affected side

If you have a cut, graze or bite on the affected side, clean it well, apply antiseptic (plus antihistamine cream if an insect bite) and cover with a plaster. Observe the area and if it shows signs of infection i.e. redness, swelling, inflammation or pain, please see your GP or Nurse Practitioner that day, to get a two week course of antibiotics.

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

Your emotions and activity levels

You may experience many different emotions after surgery, including a grieving process for the loss of your breast, 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, please contact your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist.

You can resume sexual activity as soon as you feel able, however give yourself time and do not expect too much.

Gradually re-introduce activities such as gym or Zumba classes and household tasks, after about six weeks. Be mindful of your energy levels and if the affected arm starts to ache whilst you are being active, please rest for a time before carrying on with the task.

We advise you not to drive for at least 3 weeks after your operation. You need to make sure you are in full control of your vehicle, can wear a seatbelt comfortably and are able to perform an emergency stop with confidence, before you drive.

Fitting permanent prosthesis

About 6 weeks after your operation, your permanent silicone breast prosthesis can be fitted into a well-fitting bra. This can be done in a fitting clinic in the Breast Clinic (B3).

Please call the Breast Clinical Nurse Specialists on 01225 824057 for a breast prosthesis fitting appointment. Clinics are held several times each month. Please bring a well-fitting bra to this appointment.

Many high street stores stock ranges of mastectomy bras, but they are also available online and you may wish to browse the following websites.

www.amoena.co.uk

www.nicolajane.com

www.silima.co.uk

www.anita.com

www.trulifebreastcare.com

Useful organisations

Breast Cancer Now

Fifth Floor, IbeX House,
42-47 Minories,
London.EC3N 1DY

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, RUH Bath: Meets on the first Monday of the month (except bank holidays) in A17 seminar room, RUH, from 12.30 to 2pm.No need to book. For further information contact Breast Clinical Nurse Specialists for further details: 01225 824057 or ruh-tr.breastcarenurses@nhs.net

At Your Service: Meets on the first Wednesday of the month at 10.30am in the Slug and Lettuce Bar ,George Street,Bath.£2 pp.Book by calling Nina on 01249 464111 or 07745887150

Young Women 4 Young Women Breast Cancer Group: Based at Southmead Hospital, Bristol. Meetings held on the first Wednesday of the month from 7-9pm.Call 07546512637, e mail yw4yw@hotmail.com or visit www.youngwomen4youngwomen.com

Breast care swimming group: Meets on Mondays (except bank holidays) at Kingswood School, Lansdown, Bath from 6.50-8pm.Sessions cost £2.50.Contact Jan 01249 716298 or Sue 01225 312312.

Useful Contacts

Breast Clinical Nurse Specialists: 01225 824057 (answerphone) from 8-6pm.

Email: ruh-tr.breastcarenurses.nhs.net

Breast Unit reception: 01225 825881 / 825882

Charlotte Ward (D9): 01225 824434 / 821082

Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust
Combe Park, Bath BA1 3NG
01225 428331 www.ruh.nhs.uk

Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) if you require this leaflet in a different format, or would like to feedback your experience of the hospital. Email ruh-tr.pals@nhs.net or telephone 01225 825656 / 826319