

# Going home after having a mastectomy and surgery to the lymph glands under your arm

**This leaflet explains more about returning to your everyday activities after a mastectomy and surgery to your lymph glands. If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.**

More information can also be found in **Your operation and recovery**, a booklet by Breast Cancer Care which will be given to you.

## When can I leave hospital?

Following your operation you will normally go home either the same day or the next morning.

- If you go home the same day please arrange for someone with transport to collect you. If you use a taxi you must have someone with you. You should not go home on public transport.
- If you are going home the following morning you may use public transport but you must have someone with you.
- In the first few days after your operation you will need some support with daily tasks such as shopping and cooking. If you normally live alone try to have a friend or relative to stay with you or someone who you can call on the telephone for help.
- You should be given advice about bra wear and be offered a temporary prosthesis (false breast) to wear until your wound has fully healed. You will also be sent an appointment within about six weeks to have a fitting for a permanent external prosthesis.
- Your surgeon and breast care nurse will also discuss the risk of your arm swelling following the surgery to the glands under your arm (lymphedema) and give you a separate information booklet about this.

## After I leave hospital

Most women who have a mastectomy recover well after the operation.

You may have one or more of the following possible common problems after surgery:

- Bruising, which normally settles after a few weeks.
- Pain, which is more common under the arm than in the chest area. Take pain killers such as paracetamol and ibuprofen to help your pain and if these do not work let your breast care nurse or GP know.
- Numbness, or a change in sensation. Nerves may have been cut or bruised during your operation so it is normal to have some sensitivity or numbness around the chest wall or the inside of your arm. This normally gets better but some people can be left with some numbness.
- Swelling under the arm can happen if fluid collects under your scar. This is called a seroma and the swelling will gradually go down in time.

- If a large amount of fluid makes your chest area and/or armpit (axilla) very swollen, your wound may become painful or tight. This may wake you up at night or stop you from doing your arm exercises. Contact us if this happens.
- It is normal to have a slight pulling feeling or sharp shooting pains around the wound area or for it to feel itchy or numb.

The **Your operation and recovery** booklet has more information about other less common problems that can happen after surgery.

## Looking after my wound

Your wound has been closed with dissolving stitches that don't need to be removed. It is also covered with a light waterproof dressing. Under the dressing are some thin pieces of tape called steristrips which can normally be removed 10-14 days after surgery. You will have your wound checked and your dressings removed at the Rose Centre breast dressing clinic.

You can take a brief shower after your surgery as soon as you feel ready to. Gently dry the wound area with a soft towel. Try not to soak your top dressing and if it does get wet put on a new one. Don't use perfumed soaps or cream around the wound for the first few weeks.

**Contact your breast care nurse or GP if the wound area becomes red, swollen or painful or you have a temperature as it could be a sign of infection.**

### Drain care

You may have one or more drainage tubes coming from your wound, to take blood and fluid away from the wound and try and prevent swelling.

Your surgeon will decide if a drain is needed and how long for. A drain may be needed for only 24 hours, or up to a few days.

If you are going home with a drain the nurses on the ward will tell you how to look after it and give you a separate patient information sheet to help you.

## Will I be in pain?

It is normal to feel sore when you wake up after having a mastectomy.

If you have pain it can be controlled by painkillers.

Tell your doctor or nursing team if you have pain so we can adjust your pain relief to make sure you are comfortable.

Taking the right pain relief in the right amount will make it easier for you to do the arm exercises we give you to help with any stiffness.

## Will I need to do any specific exercises?

We will give you a separate booklet to help with your arm exercises.

## When can I get back to normal activities?

It normally takes four to six weeks to fully recover from your operation.

Avoid the following straight after surgery:

- driving
- lifting heavy objects or making repetitive movements, such as vacuuming, ironing, weights
- swimming, going to the gym or playing sport.

You should get back to these activities gradually, and should only drive again when you are comfortable enough to do an emergency stop without hesitating.

You do not need to stop any sexual activity. If you find it hard adjusting emotionally to mastectomy, it can help to try to be open about your feelings. If you have problems with your body image or sexual activity you can talk it through with your breast care nurse to help.

## Will I have a follow-up appointment?

You will have a wound care check in the dressing clinic at the Rose centre within one week.

**The date of your wound care check appointment is \_\_\_\_\_**

You will have another appointment at the Rose centre 10-14 days later for the results of your operation.

**The date of your results appointment is \_\_\_\_\_**

You will also be sent an appointment within about six weeks to have a fitting for a permanent external prosthesis (a false breast).

## Useful sources of information

Getting over having a mastectomy can be hard. You may find it helpful to talk to other women who have had the operation, either before or after your mastectomy, or both. Your specialist breast cancer care nurse can help with information about how to do this.

Breast Cancer Care is another good source of information, support and local contact information.

Their website is: [www.breastcancercare.org.uk](http://www.breastcancercare.org.uk)

or call: 0808 800 6000

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about returning to your everyday activities after your mastectomy and axillary surgery, please contact the breast care nurses Tracey Hall or Jane Thomson on 020 8725 4745 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 4pm), or breast care nurse Ali Woods on 020 8725 1223 (Wednesday to Friday, 9am to 4pm). Out of hours, please contact Keate ward on 020 8725 3226 or 020 8725 3227.

**For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.stgeorges.nhs.uk](http://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk)**

## Additional services

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer). **Tel:** 020 8725 2453 **Email:** [pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk)

### NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health. **Web:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

**Tel:** 111

