

## **Everything You Wish You Had Known...about mastectomy**

When you're preparing for surgery, bring the things you'll need daily (coffee, pills, toothbrush, towels) down to an easy-to-reach level because most women are told not to lift their arms until cleared by their surgeon.

Shop and stock up before surgery on food. Frozen meals are great...so long as you can reach the microwave. You may have problems turning door knobs or pushing down soap dispensers or pulling drawers open. This is where friends who offer help can really ease things for you in the first few days after surgery.

Sleeping in a recliner or gravity chair after surgery can be more comfortable than trying to sleep in bed wrestling a pile of pillows.

You'll want a lot of pillows. If you have a pet or small child used to walking on or lying against you, a small chest pillow can be good for protection. That can also help in dealing with the seatbelt in your car.

Put a side table next to your recliner or bed for your water bottle (keep two filled and ready to go) with bendy straws, baby wipes, phone charger, books, notebook or journal, tablet and charger, with perhaps a project bag hanging off the arm of the chair.

Make plans for how you'll get pills if you can't get the usual safety bottles open. Can you pre-load a box or have a friend help you? Do you need to protect pills from pets or children?

Use a notebook to keep track of pain meds. If you are in pain on the meds you've been given or you haven't been given meds beyond a short period, let your surgeon know that you need something more.

You can't spend all of your recovery time in a chair or you'll end up with constipation. Be sure to walk as much as your energy level permits.

Get front-opening pajamas and tops so that you can get in and out of them with limited range of motion. It's okay to wear comfy informal clothing until you're fully healed. You may find that you prefer natural, soft, and stretchy clothing over sensitive scars while healing.

You'll probably come home with one or more drainage tubes with collecting devices, and your discharge instructions should cover how to take care of them. These can be hung on lanyards to take the weight of them off of healing incisions or while showering. The kangaroo pocket of a regular hoodie can be useful in managing them, but there are also special pocketed sweatshirts (examples: <https://www.pinkpepperco.com/>) or aprons available.

If you didn't get pre-op teaching about exercises to do after surgery, ask for a referral to a physical therapist. Also ask about when and how to begin scar massage. If you walk for exercise, ask about when you can swing your affected arm(s) while walking or when you can use walking poles.

Most women are discharged from surgery with a special compression bra, but many transition to front-closing sports bras within a couple weeks. These can hold soft knitted (<https://www.ravelry.com/patterns/library/knitted-knockers-double-pointed-needles>) or sewn temporary prostheses if desired.

Lingering nerve pains taper off over months, generally not as quickly as the rest of the tissue healing. You may find that wearing camisoles rather than bras helps avoid pressure on incisions or touchy areas. It's also normal to

have no sensation where nerves have been cut or removed with the surgery. You may experience phantom breast pains, which should resolve over time.

You may develop something that is called “cording”: a tightness in the web of lymph nodes that can feel like hard ropes under the arms. A physical therapist or lymphedema therapist can help this resolve.

There are many options for reconstruction (or not) and each woman will make her own decision between “going flat,” wearing prostheses, or have reconstruction done. Your surgeon should accept your decision and if they do not, you may want to interview a different surgeon.

It's also increasingly popular to "go flat" in order to reduce complications and for greater comfort. "Foobs" are always an option for occasions when filling out a bra seems necessary.

It may take some months before the weight of silicone or weighted prostheses is comfortable against surgical scars.

Many types of foobs may be more comfortable than straight silicone against the skin in hot weather. Some women knit or sew fabric covers or fabric pads to go between silicone foobs and skin. Silk (cut from thrifted shirts) or athletic synthetics may be best for sweat/drying. In any case, it's highly recommended to wash them with a gentle soap after every wearing.

Once fully healed, some women opt for tattoos over the surgical area so that they can feel happy instead of marred by seeing their scars. <http://p-ink.org/>

Reconstruction is a work in progress that can take more than a year after mastectomy. It's important to understand that reconstruction is to provide a particular look when dressed, not when naked. Neither reconstruction nor mastectomy is plastic surgery unless you specifically hire a plastic surgeon.

Every mastectomy may require revisiting a lot of your wardrobe. Not only will fit be different, but you may find that loss of chest tissue will leave you wanting to bundle up more in the winter. Reconstructed breasts will be room temperature, not body temp, so they will always feel cooler than the rest of your body.

Reconstructed breasts sit under the muscles, not over them. This means that they will always feel different to breasts.

Take time to adjust, being gentle with yourself. It's okay and normal to feel like a stranger in your body at first.