

Self-Care After Single Stage Direct to Implant Breast Reconstruction

What to expect after surgery

After your surgery, you will have a large gauze bandage over your incision. The bandage is held in place by a surgical bra. The bandage and bra will be put on while you are in the operating room.

One or 2 small plastic drains may be placed near your incision line. These drains collect fluid that normally develops under your skin after surgery. They will usually stay in place for 1 to 2 weeks. Your care team will teach you how to care for your drain(s) before you leave the hospital. Your physician will remove the drain(s) there is less than 30 cubic centimeter (about 1 fluid ounce) of drainage in 24 hours. Most patients describe the drain removal as a slight pulling or stinging sensation that lasts only a few minutes. You will not need pain medicine for the drain removal. Afterward, some fluid may still leak.

Cover the area with a gauze pad and change the pad if it becomes damp. This drainage is normal. You should expect it for 24 to 48 hours. The site is usually healed after that time.

Some discomfort is normal after surgery. You may have a stinging sensation along the incision line and your drain site(s) may itch. You may also notice some tenderness along your lower rib cage. These feelings go away slowly after surgery. You may take pain medication when you need it. Be sure to ask for it so you will be as comfortable and active as possible.

Other common feelings after your surgery include:

Numbness under your arm and over your chest

Warmth in your arm

A feeling of water trickling down your arm

These sensations are caused by the nerves being cut or moved during the mastectomy. They will gradually lessen as the months go by, but some degree of numbness may be permanent.

Caring for your incision

While you are in the hospital, your physician or nurse will examine your reconstructed breast every day. They will change the bandage as needed. We encourage you to look at your chest during the bandage changes so you are familiar with how it looks. When you are ready, you can care for your incision with help from your nurse. This will help prepare you to care for yourself at home.

At first, the size of your reconstructed breast may be different than your natural breast. There may be lumps and bumps, swelling or bruising of the breast skin. This is normal.

The incision line across the breast mound is closed with stitches (sutures). You may see some redness and some slight bloodstains on the gauze pad. You may also feel tenderness around the incision. These are normal signs after surgery. After examining the area, the nurse may place a fresh gauze pad over your suture line.

When you leave the hospital, your stitches will still be in place. They will be covered with a gauze pad. You can wear the surgical bra or any support bra that does not have an underwire and does not press on the implant.

You should replace the bandages 1 time a day after surgery for 3 to 4 days. You may shower 48 hours after surgery. We recommend daily showers to help keep the suture line clean. Do not take tub baths until your incision is fully healed. Soaking the area may increase your risk of infection. Before entering the shower, remove your bra and the gauze pad. Wash with lukewarm water and a plain non-perfumed soap. Gently clean your incision line and skin. Rinse well. **The shower stream should not be directed at your reconstructed breast.** Pat the incision line dry with a clean towel, but do not rub it.

Only use an electric razor to shave under your arm on the side of the surgery. Also, deodorant could cause an infection, so do not use it until after you put your bra on. Do not use deodorant on the side of the surgery if you have any break in your skin. After your shower, inspect the incision line and drain site carefully. To do this, stand in front of a mirror in a room with good lighting.

Call your plastic surgeon or nurse immediately if you have any of these symptoms:

New skin redness

New drainage from the incision

Temperature more than 101 degrees F

When you have finished the inspection, place a clean gauze pad over the incision line. You should wear the bra 24 hours a day. For more gauze pads and surgical bras, call our office at 847.854.3522.

Staying comfortable

As you heal, there are a few things you can do at home to feel more comfortable:

Warm showers

Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Motrin®, taken with food)

A non-perfumed moisturizer put on 1 or 2 times (Do not put the lotion directly on the incision for the first 6 weeks.)

Stretching exercises (your nurse will show you these)

Never apply a heating pad or warm compress directly on your breast mound. Your ability to sense things has changed so you may burn your skin.

Exercise

Regular exercise after your surgery is good for you, but there are some exercises you should not do.

Do not do the following activities until your physician says it is OK:

High-impact aerobics

Jogging

Lifting weights

Swimming

Avoid exercises that build up your chest muscles (pectoralis). Do the simple exercises at home that are shown in your exercise booklet. These exercises will improve your comfort and flexibility.

Clothing tips

When you leave the hospital, you will be wearing a surgical bra.

After the drains are removed, you can wear your own bra. It should:

Be comfortable

Not be too tight

Not have an underwire

Completing of your breast reconstruction

If it is indicated, the surgeon will discuss surgery on the other breast to make it match the shape and size of your reconstructed breast. This surgery makes the natural and new breasts look alike. This surgery is up to you. You may want to have it, decide whether to have it later or choose not to have it at all.

If you decide to have a nipple reconstruction, it is usually done about 3 months after the permanent implant is placed. Surgery on the other breast may also be done at this time.

Your surgeon can perform nipple reconstruction in the hospital or in their office. If your reconstructed nipple/areola needs to be darkened, the area can be tattooed in the office.

Do not wait to get help or support from your plastic surgeon or nurse. If you have questions or concerns, please call us at 847.854.3522.

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