



bright link | What to do Before & After a Mastectomy

PRE-MASTECTOMY PREPARATION

THE MONTH BEFORE SURGERY

It is important to remember that it is completely normal to experience changes in your mood in weeks leading up to surgery. At times, you may feel relaxed and content, and at others you may feel sad or angry. You may find comfort in speaking with a psychologist leading up to the big day to help alleviate any anxiety you may experience. The key is to let yourself recognize and feel these emotions.

When meeting with your doctor before surgery, be sure to ask any questions to make you most comfortable the day of your operation. One important thing to be aware of is resident involvement on the day of the surgery. Many times the resident will do the cutting and stitching during surgery. Be sure to discuss this with your surgeon in order to design a plan that you are comfortable with, and don't be afraid to speak up if you prefer to have your cutting and stitching done by your doctor.

Before surgery you should purchase two pairs of loose fitting, cotton pajamas that button up the front. You will live in these pajamas for about a week post surgery and should plan to throw them away following their use. Plan to buy pajama tops that are over-sized because you will have drains underneath them. You should also purchase two sports bras with hook and eye clasps as you may be required to wear these after the mastectomy bra for a week or two.

Most importantly, now is the time to really take care of yourself. Some women approach this time as training for surgery; they amp up their workout regimen by doing extra sit-ups to ensure stomach muscles are strong and ready to stand in for the chest muscles when necessary. This preparation can also be comforting and keep your mind occupied. Remember, some days you may have lots of energy and will want to exercise and move around, while others you may feel lazy, lethargic and unsocial. Don't push yourself- give yourself permission to truly feel, cope and most importantly, be good to yourself.

A FEW DAYS BEFORE SURGERY

You may want to prepare for the side effects you will experience following anesthesia on the day of your surgery. It is not uncommon to feel bloating due to constipation associated with general anesthesia. Some women say that limiting their salt intake and cutting carbonated drinks from their diet in the days leading up to their operation helped them feel less bloated. You can also increase your water consumption to ensure your body is hydrated and ready for the anesthesia.

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YOUR HOSPITAL CHECKLIST

The night before surgery, lay out everything you plan to bring to the hospital. Be sure to leave valuables at home.

- Comfortable socks
- Pajamas that button up the front
- A zip-up hooded sweatshirt
- Toothbrush
- A neck pillow that can be put in the microwave & easily heated up
- Drawstring pants
- Face wash

THE DAY OF SURGERY

Many women say that waking up and washing/blow drying their hair before leaving for surgery made them feel extra ready and clean for the day.

Also, you may want to ask your doctor for anti-nausea medicine before you go into the operating room if you have had nausea problems with narcotics or anesthesia in the past. It is important to inform your anesthesiologist of any past issues so they can make sure to address them before, during and after your surgery.

POST-MASTECTOMY

The time it takes for one to feel “back to normal” depends on the individual. Do not be alarmed if you experience any complications; your body may need time to adjust to the big operation. On average, most women are able to return back to work about two weeks later. Many advise that it is easiest to go back part-time initially, if possible, to ease yourself back into things.

DRAINS AND EXPANDERS

Your surgeon will determine how many drains you have and the length of time that the drains stay in, which can vary from a week to ten days. You will most likely need to empty the drains one to two times a day and record the output for your surgeon. This is a good job for your sister, mom, husband or partner to help with. The nurse will teach them the process, which is quite easy to learn.

In addition to drains, many women will have breast tissue expanders (partially deflated implants) placed underneath the muscles of the chest wall to stretch the breast skin and muscle. Expanders can be inserted at the time of mastectomy or about three to four weeks following surgery when your drains have been removed. Expanders will stay in place until the skin over the breast area has stretched enough to make room for a more permanent implant. The time expanders stay in place varies from person to person, and a separate outpatient procedure will be required to exchange the expander for an implant and to refine the breast shape.

CLOTHING

Ask your surgeon about how to obtain post-mastectomy garments that are designed to hold drains and are easy to get in and out of. If you'd prefer not to buy a special garment, you will want to wear something that zips or opens in the front and is loose fitting. Many women recommend zip-up hooded sweatshirts that have pockets on the inside.

SHOWERING

Showering is typically permitted 24-48 hours after surgery. Securing the drains can often be challenging and you will likely need assistance the first week or two. This is often the biggest challenge, but an easy trick is to pin drains to a shoelace around your neck. Tub soaking is typically not recommended. Many women recommend having your hair washed and dried at a hair salon, so you can feel clean while getting pampered.

SLEEPING

Expect sleeping to be somewhat difficult. Most patients complain that their discomfort is the greatest while lying down. Sleeping with a pillow under your knees to ensure your back is adequately supported can help alleviate this pain. Elevating the shoulders by putting two pillows under the head and one pillow under the shoulders can also be helpful in reducing pain while lying down.

GETTING BACK TO YOUR NORMAL ROUTINE

Don't be afraid to limit visitors after surgery, especially in the beginning. Even carrying on a 20-minute conversation can be tough, so don't feel obligated to see everyone immediately after.

Most surgeons will limit rigorous physical activity for about six weeks following surgery, with light exercising resuming after two weeks. Your surgeon will recommend post-mastectomy stretches to help reduce soreness, which you should implement as soon as he or she allows. When permitted, light movement after surgery is encouraged to maintain arm and shoulder range of motion and prevent complications like blood clots.

In general, recovery times vary widely, and the ability to drive, exercise and resume your pre-surgery lifestyle will come with time. Ask your doctor if you have specific concerns regarding your recovery, and most importantly, be sure to take it slow and listen to your body when resuming normal activities.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

If you are considering surgery and would like to speak with someone who has already navigated the surgery process, join our [PinkPal Peer Support Program](#), and connect with another high-risk young woman who is uniquely familiar with your situation.

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