

After breast cancer surgery

This leaflet is for anyone who has had surgery for breast cancer. It discusses what you can expect after your surgery and gives some general advice and information.

If you have any questions or concerns that aren't answered in the leaflet, don't hesitate to contact one of the clinical nurse specialists on the following numbers. Leave a message on the answer phone if the nurses are unavailable. Telephone: [0118 322 7420](tel:01183227420) or email: breastcarenurses@royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Recovery time

Many people are surprised at the length of time it takes to get over an operation. Most people feel tired, vulnerable and insecure when they first go home. You can also feel frustrated by not being able to do all the things you want to do.

Try not to set yourself big tasks. Remember to rest – it is a big part of your recovery. Resting on the bed is more relaxing than in a chair. Try to 'pace' yourself and take things 'one step at a time'.

There may be times when you feel isolated or are struggling to come to terms with your emotions. This is a common feeling and there is no right or wrong way to feel. Everyone is individual and will experience different emotions at different times during their recovery. Try to let your family and friends know how you are feeling so they are able to support you. It can also help to discuss it with your breast care nurse or specialist. Psychological / counselling services are available but in high demand with a long wait. Your breast care nurse can refer you to Talking Therapies if appropriate. The 'someone like me' telephone support service via breast cancer now offers a service with a volunteer who has 'been there too'.

The healing process

After your operation, you may have a clear waterproof adhesive dressing on your breast wound or steri-strips (paper skin closures) and a white soft dressing on your armpit wound. The white dressing can be removed when you go home. The clear waterproof dressing and the steri-strips should stay in place and are usually removed in the clinic at your follow-up appointment. You can shower and pat the area dry gently but avoid a bath. Use an unperfumed soap and avoid deodorant until the wound is completely healed.

The stitches used are dissolvable, but occasionally, the stitch ends may need to be trimmed. It is quite normal to feel some discomfort, tingling or numbness around the wound. Sharp or shooting pains are often noticeable 7-14 days after surgery. You may notice that the area around the scar is hard and lumpy; this is part of the healing process and will go.

If you feel sore or uncomfortable, you may take painkillers following the recommended dosage. If you experience severe pain, contact your GP or ask the advice of the breast care nurses.

Haematoma

After a few days, you may have more stiffness and discomfort as you begin to move your arms more. You may notice a swelling around your wounds. This could be due to a collection of blood, but doesn't mean you are bleeding. This may not be a problem and there is no cause for concern. If you are uncomfortable or concerned, please contact the breast care nurse for advice.

Infection

In some cases, a wound may become infected. If your wounds become red with increased swelling or discharge, see your GP as you may need antibiotics.

Bras

We suggest that you wear a supportive bra when your drainage tubes have been removed. You can do this in the hospital or wait until you get home. Wearing a bra will help support the wound and will make you feel more comfortable. An old bra may be more comfortable at this stage. Under-wired bras may irritate so are best avoided, though it is possible with some types to slip the wire out of the affected side to make it more comfortable.

Sports bras are particularly good, as long as they are not too tight or constricting. Fuller breasted women many wish to wear a soft bra at night for the first few weeks. If you feel that the area is too sensitive to wear a bra, then a cropped top or maternity sleep bra may provide a little support until you are able to manage a bra again.

Lymph node surgery

Introduction

The aim of this surgery is to find out whether the cancer has spread beyond the breast. This is done by removing one or more lymph nodes from under your arm on the same side as the affected breast.

Lymph node biopsy and dissection has two main purposes. It removes the breast cancer that may have spread into the armpit (axilla). And it allows the surgeon to stage your cancer by learning how far the cancer has spread.

After surgery

There are a number of sensations you may experience following lymph node surgery. Numbness and soreness under the arm is very common. Your upper arm may become sensitive to the touch. These sensations are due to unavoidable damage to small nerves in the arm during the operation. They will recover and repair but this does take a number of week or even months.

Occasionally, pain and unpleasant sensations can persist under the arm despite simple treatments. If this is the case then you should contact your GP, breast care nurse or mention it at your breast cancer follow-up appointment. If it is particularly troublesome and does not respond to treatment, then a referral to a pain specialist and/or physiotherapist may be required.

The arm is often more uncomfortable in the evenings, when you are tired. Supporting your arm on a pillow often helps, and remember to take painkillers if you need to. Wait until your wound has fully healed before using deodorant; roll on deodorant is better than a spray.

Seromas

A seroma is a build-up of fluid in or around your armpit. You may notice that your armpit or breast becomes swollen or hard and discoloured. If the swelling becomes large enough to cause pain or tightening in the area, it means the fluid needs to be removed.

There is a clinic available in the hospital on Tuesday between 2.30pm-4pm only and Friday 9.30am-11am only. The clinic is held in the Berkshire Cancer Centre. Please call the breast care nurses on 0118 322 7420 to make an appointment. If you experience problems with fluid collecting outside of the seroma clinic hours, you should contact your breast care nurse (Mon-Fri 8am-4pm excluding bank holidays) or outside of these times you should contact the ward where you had surgery for further advice.

There is also a clinic at West Berkshire Community Hospital and patients should call 01635 273475 for further information regarding clinic times.

Lymphoedema

Keeping your arm in good condition will help to prevent lymphoedema, which is a swelling of the arm on the side where you had your surgery. Lymphoedema is caused by a blockage to the lymph drainage from the arm after the surgery. The blockage could be due to the removal of some of the lymph nodes or scarring after surgery. Lymphoedema may develop at any time after surgery – even years later.

Sometimes, the arm does not develop lymphoedema but the breast or chest wall can be affected by this problem. Similar symptoms of swelling and puffiness of the wound can occur together with feelings of tightness. Again, if you have any concerns, contact your breast care nurse.

Tips for looking after your skin:

- It is important to look after the texture of your skin by keeping it well moisturised. Dryness can cause cracks in the skin, which are ideal places for germs to get in.
- Treat small cuts and grazes promptly by cleaning well and applying an antiseptic cream. If the area becomes red, hot, swollen or inflamed, you should consult your GP as you may need antibiotics.
- Try and prevent insect bites by using an insect repellent.
- Wear gloves for washing up or gardening to try and avoid injury to the hand on your affected arm.

- Take care when cutting your fingernails. Wear a thimble for sewing.
- Protect your skin from sunburn.
- If you feel that your arm is becoming puffy or swollen, contact your breast care nurse.

Some Dos and Don'ts to help prevent lymphoedema

- **Do** use your arm as normally as possible. Muscle activity will help to improve your arm's circulation.
- **Don't** lift heavy items such as shopping bags with your affected arm. Also try to avoid doing vigorous repetitive work with your arm.
- **Don't** have injections or have your blood pressure or blood samples taken on your affected arm.
- **Do** take extra care when removing underarm hair or hair on your arm. An electric shaver is the safest method.
- **Don't** wear tight fitted bra straps, sleeves, watches or rings. All of these reduce the ability of the lymph vessels near the surface of the skin to drain.

Recovery information class

This session is to ensure you are getting back to normal and to discuss any problems you may have with your arm/shoulder movements. A breast care nurse and a lymphoedema specialist physiotherapist will be present. At this session we will discuss lymphoedema prevention in more detail and you will be given a written information sheet. The classes occur monthly on a Tuesday afternoon and you will receive a letter with a date about 6-8 weeks after your surgery. *(Currently as of August 2020, this service is suspended. Your breast care nurse may give you an exercise leaflet, as appropriate.)*

Resuming normal activities

Ask for advice from your breast care nurse or GP about returning to work. It will depend on the type of work that you do and the extent of your surgery. It is better to feel completely well before you return. Some people feel tired and find concentration difficult when they first return to work.

Driving

You can drive again when you feel able. This is usually 2-3 weeks after your surgery. Make sure you can manage the gears and handbrake without strain. You may need extra padding around the seatbelt to protect your wounds.

Sexual relations

Many women lose interest in a physical relationship after breast surgery. This is common and is usually temporary. The breast care nurses can discuss this in more detail if you wish.

Follow-up appointments

You will usually be given an outpatients appointment for 15-20 days after your surgery. A member of the surgical team will discuss your results with you and the outcome of your surgery. If you require any further treatment for your cancer, an appointment will be made at a later date for you to see a specialist in the treatment of cancer (an oncologist). The Berkshire Cancer Centre takes part in clinical trials and this may also be discussed with you.

Breast prosthesis

If you would like a permanent breast form (prosthesis) following your surgery you should contact the Berkshire Cancer Centre outpatient department on 0118 322 7888 about 4-6 weeks after your discharge from hospital to arrange an appointment in the fortnightly prosthetic clinic. You will have had an opportunity to discuss whether you would like a prosthesis prior to your surgery and again in the seroma clinic.

Breast care nurses

0118 322 7420 (Monday to Friday 8.30am – 4.30pm)

Email: breastcarenurses@royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Breast Cancer Support Groups

The groups meet every month, details below:

(Please contact the relevant contact for up-to-date information on the next meeting.)

Reading Support Group

FIRST MONDAY at 7.30pm (please check before attending as programme dates can vary at times).

Dunedin Hospital, 16 Bath Road Reading RG1 6NB

Please contact the breast care nurse specialist (Dunedin Hospital) 0118 958 7676 ext 4131 or the breast care nurses at the RBH tel: 0118 322 7420.

Newbury Support Group

Meet monthly on second TUESDAY of month.

Regency Park Hotel Thatcham and a drop in session on occasional THURSDAYS at West Berkshire Community Hospital.

Please contact: Helen Relf, Breast Cancer Care Volunteer 01635 867619.

Newbury Support Sessions

For newly diagnosed patients. Ask your breast care nurse for details.

MONDAYS 10.00am – 12.30pm.

Sue Ryder Charles Clore Unit, West Berkshire Community Hospital, Beenham Rd.
Thatcham RG18 3AS

Please contact: Denise Cossey, 01635 273725.

Other useful organisations

Breast Cancer Now

0808 800 6000

www.breastcancernow.org

Macmillan Cancer Support

0808 808 0000

Mon-Fri 9am-8pm

www.macmillan.org.uk

Breakthrough Breast Cancer

www.Breakthrough.org.uk

NHS Website

www.nhs.uk

NICE(National Institute of Clinical Excellence) www.NICE.org.uk

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

Breast Care Nurses, August 2020

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