



***After
breast surgery:
what to expect***

***Information
for patients and carers***

Aberdeen Royal Infirmary

Aberdeen Breast Centre

Aberdeen Breast Centre offers a supportive environment for people with breast cancer, their families, carers and friends.

We have a walk-in area where you can access information from our video and book library, check out our social events or just simply drop in for a coffee and a chat.

Ward 42

Aberdeen Royal Infirmary

We are open:

Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm

or call us on:

 **(01224) 552211** 

Come along and visit us!

After your surgery

Care of your wounds

Before you leave hospital, the nurse in the ward will advise you how to look after your wound. S/he will give you a supply of any dressings that you need and advise you how to use them.

You can wash your breast and under your arm daily with your normal soap. Rinse and dry gently with a clean towel. Apply a clean dressing if you have been advised to do so.

If you have:

- redness or heat around the wound;
- swelling around the wound or under the arm;
- increased feelings of tightness around the wound under the arm;
- increased pain of a continuous nature;

these may be signs of an infection or a collection of fluid.

This can easily be treated. Contact your Breast Care Nurse or Aberdeen Breast Centre (phone numbers on page 16).

Drains

- **Mastectomy**

You will have 2 drains in place, one from the breast area and one from your armpit.

- **Wide local excision**

Drains are rarely inserted with this procedure.

If you leave hospital with your drains in place the ward nurses will give you information on how to look after them.

Altered sensations

If you have had lymph glands removed from your armpit, you may have some unusual feelings and some altered sensations on the affected side after your surgery. These may include:

- pins and needles
- darting sensations or stabbing, shooting pains occasionally
- numbness
- a feeling of tightness
- a burning sensation.

You may also be aware of these sensations around the wound, under your arm, down the inside of your arm and in the breast area.

These sensations are quite normal and may continue for a period of months. However, you may have some permanent discomfort.

Pain relief

It is common to have some pain or discomfort after any surgery.

- Continue to take pain relief if you have pain when you get home.
- We will give you a supply of pain relief tablets to use at home if you need them. Your GP can supply more if you need them.
- If you try to do too much you will probably have aches and pains the next day. These will pass with some rest.
- If you develop a severe pain doing any activity, **STOP** immediately and contact your GP.

Fatigue

Many people are surprised at the length of time it takes to get over an operation. It is common to feel tired and insecure when you go home due to a combination of your surgery and anaesthetic. This tiredness may last a few days or few weeks.

You may find it frustrating not being able to do all the things that you want to, but try not to set yourself large tasks to do.

Try to get enough rest, as it will help your recovery.

Bras

- **Mastectomy**

We would advise that you start wearing your bra and prosthesis as soon as possible after removal of your drain.

- **Wide local excision**

You can start wearing your bra on the evening of your surgery. The bra will support your wound. An old bra may be more comfortable at this stage. Underwired bras may irritate but you can remove the wire on the affected side to make it more comfortable. You may wish to wear a bra at night for the first few weeks.

Seroma

What is a seroma?

A seroma is a collection of fluid just under the skin at your wound site. The fluid is the same as that taken away by the drain that was in place after your surgery.

Why may a seroma develop?

There are no common factors that determine if you are likely to develop a seroma. One in three women who have breast surgery will go on to develop a seroma.

What will happen?

Most people become aware of a swelling under their arm or along the site of their wound. This should not cause any pain but may become slightly uncomfortable. If this occurs you may need to come to the Aberdeen Breast Centre to have this fluid drained off. This is a simple procedure that is painless and only takes a few minutes. You may need to come to the ward a few times and we will assess you, and drain fluid as necessary.

There is nothing you can do to make it any better or worse. The fluid will gradually reduce and eventually disappear.

Lymphoedema

Lymphoedema can occur as a result of breast cancer and its treatments. The following information describes what it is and suggests what you can do to help yourself.

What is the lymphatic system?

The lymphatic system extends throughout the body and is made up of lymphatic vessels and lymph nodes. It helps maintain the balance of fluid in the body by acting as a “filter” to the blood system. Excess fluid in the body tissues drains into the lymphatic system then returns it to the blood system. The lymph nodes filter unwanted materials such as bacteria and so help fight infection.

What is lymphoedema?

Both breast cancer and its treatments (surgery and radiotherapy) can result in lymph fluid building up in the tissues and causing swelling. The medical term for this swelling is oedema which gives rise to the name “lymphoedema”. Lymphoedema can occur immediately after treatment or sometimes many years later. While the arm and hand are most commonly affected, swelling can also occur in the chest wall, shoulder or the area behind the armpit.

Who is at risk?

It is not known why some people develop lymphoedema and others do not. However, it is known that an infection or injury to the affected arm can increase the risk of the condition occurring.

What can I do to help myself?

Listed below are some tips to help reduce the risk of developing lymphoedema.

- Apply moisturising lotion daily to keep your skin supple and to prevent dry cracks. If you are receiving radiotherapy you can use aqueous cream throughout your treatment.
- Treat all cuts, scratches and insect bites with an antiseptic cream.
- Avoid getting sunburnt by using a high sun protection factor (SPF) cream (SPF 20 or higher).
- Avoid insect bites by using insect repellent.
- Protect your hands from injury by wearing gloves for jobs such as gardening, washing up or taking food out of the oven.
- Offer your unaffected side when having an injection, blood sample or blood pressure taken.
- Take care when removing underarm hair. Using an electric razor or depilatory cream is the safest.
- Avoid tight clothing, watches or rings.

Can lymphoedema be treated?

Most people who develop lymphoedema only have very mild symptoms. These symptoms respond very well to treatment and this means it can be well controlled in most cases. Rarely, some people develop severe symptoms. The earlier the swelling is treated, the more successful the outcome is likely to be.

What should I do if I notice a swelling?

You should report any swelling of your hand, arm or chest wall to your Breast Care Nurse.

Use your arm normally. Muscle movement encourages lymph drainage and prevents joint stiffness.

Scar care

As wounds heal they go through several changes. By following this advice you can reduce scarring to a minimum. This will give the best cosmetic result for your scar, but it will not make it disappear completely.

- When your wound dressing has been removed, you can wash this area with mild soap.
- Using **aqueous cream**, (available from most chemists) you should begin to gently massage the area, increasing the pressure to a firm massage. This will prevent it from becoming dry and tight.
- You should massage your scar twice a day. This should be done until the scar settles and does not become dry without the moisturiser.
- Your scar will be very sensitive to sunlight. Use total sunblock for the first year and a high SPF cream after this time, or keep covered.

Breast prosthesis

The treatment of breast cancer can have an impact on your life and the lives of those who are close to you. It does not matter how much back-up and support you get from others, you will deal with the loss of your breast in your own way.

Many women find that advice about choosing the correct fitting bra and being fitted properly for a prosthesis helps to give them back their self-confidence and improves their self-image.

What is a breast prosthesis and why is it important for me to wear one?

A breast prosthesis is an artificial breast. It is made of silicone and is designed to look and feel much like your own breast. It helps to restore a feminine shape and feeling of balance. Wearing a breast prosthesis may also help to restore your self-confidence.

Who will fit me for a prosthesis?

A specialist Prosthesis Adviser will fit you for your prosthesis. She will be able to fit you for a temporary and a permanent prosthesis, as well as give you advice about bras and swimwear.

While in hospital you will be fitted with a temporary prosthesis which is soft, cotton backed, and is easy to wear next to your wound when you go home.

Approximately 8 weeks later you will be fitted for a permanent prosthesis. If you are getting radiotherapy you will be fitted when this is complete.

- A well fitting bra will give you the correct support and ensure that your breast prosthesis looks natural and is comfortable.
- If you go swimming, there is no reason why, once you have recovered from your treatment, that you cannot start swimming again. The Prosthesis Adviser will give you advice about appropriate swimwear.

Resuming normal activities

Please remember that everyone progresses at a different rate and you should take things at your own pace.

Work

It will be easier to plan your return to work when you have been seen at your follow-up appointment (approximately 2 to 3 weeks after surgery). This is when you will be told if further treatment is advised. The type of surgery you have had and the type of work you do will be taken into account when considering going back to work. You can discuss this with your specialist, Breast Care Nurse or your GP.

Driving

You can return to driving when you are comfortable and have full range of movement of your arm. You should also feel able to safely have control in all situations, including emergencies. Check with your car insurance company if you are unsure.

Lifting

Try to avoid heavy lifting. This includes carrying shopping bags and lifting toddlers. Break your workload into small amounts at a time.

After about 8 weeks your wound should be well healed and you can gradually return to normal activities.

Sexual relations

Loss of confidence and change in the way you see yourself causes many women to lose interest in their sexual relationship for some time after breast surgery. This is common and usually temporary. Your Breast Care Nurse will discuss this with you if you wish.

Adjusting to diagnosis and treatment

Your diagnosis and treatment will probably have caused you and your family anxiety and your feelings may have been confused.

It has been shown that some women who have had an operation to their breast have found that their image of themselves has changed and they feel different about themselves. This can happen whether you have had a small part of the breast removed or the whole breast, and also when reconstruction has been done.

While we are very hopeful that you will return to what is usual for you physically and psychologically as soon as possible, as in any crisis, people sometimes have delayed reactions.

These reactions may show themselves in different ways, for example:

- difficulty sleeping
- waking often during the night
- not wanting to see people or go out
- feelings of extreme anxiety
- feeling miserable
- difficulty concentrating
- feeling you are not coping.

If your reaction to your diagnosis and treatment is delayed, please do not hesitate to contact the Breast Care Nurses for help and advice. We are here to help you adjust to both your diagnosis and treatment.

Follow up appointments

We will send you an out-patient appointment for approximately 2 to 3 weeks after your surgery. Your consultant surgeon will see you at this appointment. S/he will discuss your results with you and check your wound. If you need further treatment this will be discussed at this time and arrangements will be made for this to begin.

The Breast Care Nurses also attend this clinic and will be available to discuss any concerns you may have.

Your follow up appointments

Time from diagnosis		Investigation	Place of appointment	Appt date	Comments
Year 1	6 months		Oncology Clinic and/or Surgical Clinic		6 months Oncoplastic (surgical) review, if required
	12 months	Mammography	Surgical Clinic		
Year 2	24 months	Mammography	Surgical Clinic		Chemo/radiotherapy review, if applicable. Years 1 and 2 (inclusive) Surgical Clinic (if above not applicable)
Year 3	36 months	Mammography	Nurse Practitioner Clinic		Years 3 to 5 (inclusive) You will have an annual mammogram and be seen by the Nurse Practitioner
Year 4	48 months	Mammography	Nurse Practitioner Clinic		

Time from diagnosis		Investigation	Place of appointment	Appt date	Comments
Year 5	60 months	Mammography	Nurse Practitioner Clinic		Letter from Nurse Practitioner about your next 5 years' follow up.
Year 6	72 months	Mammography			Years 6 to 10 Annual mammogram only
Year 7	84 months	Mammography			
Year 8	96 months	Mammography			
Year 9	108 months	Mammography			
Year 10	120 months	Mammography			

After 10 years of follow up, if you are over 50 years old, you will be discharged to the national breast screening service.

After 10 years of follow up, if you are under 50 years old, you will have mammography every 24 months until age 50, and then discharged to the national breast screening service.

Contact telephone numbers

Breast Care Nurses

 (01224) 554074 

Monday to Friday 8.30am to 4.30pm

If we are not available, please leave a message on the answer phone and we will get back to you as soon as we can.

Aberdeen Breast Centre

 (01224) 552211 

Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm

If we are not available, please leave a message on the answer phone and we will get back to you as soon as we can.

Prosthesis Adviser

 (01224) 551231 

Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm

If I am not available, please leave a message on the answer phone and I will get back to you as soon as I can.

Physiotherapists
☎ (01224) 553409 ☎
Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm

If you have any problems outwith office hours or at weekends you can contact:

Ward 42
☎ (01224) 550542 ☎

**This leaflet is also available in large print.
Other formats and languages can be
supplied on request. Please call Quality
Development on (01224) 554149 for a
copy. Ask for leaflet 0080.**

Feedback from the public helped us to develop this leaflet.
If you have any comments on how we can improve it,
please call (01224) 554149 to let us know.