

# What to Expect After Breast Cancer Surgery

## After Your Surgery

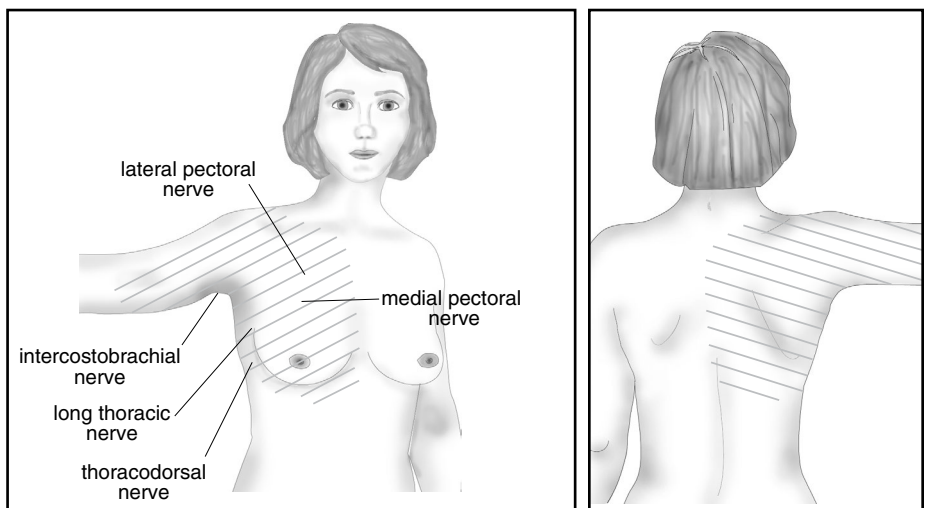
- You may need to have a drain to help reduce fluid from collecting under the skin. If you have a drain in place, there are special exercises you may do.
- Follow all of the activity and exercise guidelines given to you when you leave the hospital.
  - If you have drain in place, your nurse will teach you how to care for it before you go home. For more information, see “Arm Exercises After Breast Surgery or Axillary Surgery When a Drain is in Place,” pt-ah-14797.
  - If you do not have a drain (or after your drain is removed) follow the arm exercises in “Arm Exercises After Breast Cancer or Axillary Surgery After the Drain is Out,” pt-ah-12664.
- You may be given a surgical bra to wear after your surgery. Follow the instructions from your surgeon on how long you should wear it.
- You may have bandages placed on your incisions. Follow the instructions given to you by your surgeon on how long to wear them and how often you should change them.
- Wear loose, comfortable clothing.

## Sensation Changes

After breast cancer surgery you may feel sensation changes in and around the breast. These changes are caused by nerves that were handled or cut during surgery.

The changes you feel depends on the area of the surgery and how much surrounding tissue was involved. You may feel:

- |                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| ■ numb               | ■ achy or sore  |
| ■ tingly             | ■ tight or stiff  |
| ■ pain               | ■ unpleasant or weird                                   |
| ■ burning            | ■ heavy   |
| ■ weak               | ■ sensitive   |
| ■ itchy              | ■ phantom pain (feelings of the removed breast/tissue). |
| ■ throbbing          |   |
| ■ “pins and needles” |   |



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**You may have some changes in sensation or feeling in the areas in and around your breast.**

**(over)**

## Follow-up Appointment with Your Surgeon

- Your surgeon will look at your incisions and check your arm range of motion.
- Your surgeon will talk about your surgery and the results of your pathology report.
- Depending on your diagnosis and the type of surgery you had, you may be referred to:
  - radiation oncology
  - medical oncology (such as chemotherapy or hormone therapy)
  - cancer rehabilitation.

## Your Recovery

- Most of the sensation changes will gradually disappear over time. The most common changes are numbness, pain, stiffness and occasional twinges. Keeping track of what you are feeling will help you avoid or modify certain activities that make these feelings worse. Continue to do any exercises given to you by your health care team.
- You can gently massage the scar once the incision has healed. **Do not do this until your surgeon says it is OK.**
- In the shower or bath, put a few drops of a mild liquid soap on a clean, soft sponge. Lightly move the sponge in small circles along the scar line for about 1 minute. This will help the incision heal and keep your skin soft. **Do not do this until your surgeon says it is OK.**
- If you have radiation therapy, follow your radiation oncologist's instructions for skin care. You will usually need to apply an unscented moisturizer several times each day (except right before any treatments). This helps prevent skin breakdown.

## When to Call Your Health Care Provider

Call your health care provider if:

- a fibrous band of tissue (axillary cording) develops under your skin in your underarm, elbow, forearm and/or wrist.
  - This band of tissue can cause discomfort and it may keep you from raising your arm over your head.
  - Be sure to keep doing your exercises. It is possible you may need to see a physical therapist to help this condition get better.
- you have pain that becomes worse or does not go away with rest and over-the-counter pain relief
- you notice early symptoms of lymphedema:
  - changes to your skin (breasts, chest, arms, hands or fingers)
  - skin feels sore or tight (breasts, chest, arms, hands or fingers)
  - your arm feels heavy
  - you have a cut or burn that does not heal
  - your clothing feels tighter
  - your rings or shirts do not fit as well.
- any questions or concerns about your recovery.

## Support Group

Joining a breast cancer support group can be of help as you cope physically and emotionally after surgery. Hearing other survivors talk about their experiences and talking about your changes can be helpful to your healing. For more information, please talk with a member of your health care team.