



Preparing for a Mastectomy

Below are some tips from women who have experienced mastectomy. Your experience will be unique to you, and your care team is your best resource.

What to Expect on Your Surgery Day

Mastectomy is a broad term and covers multiple surgical procedures. Different surgeons and different care centers may have different policies. Conversation with your own surgeon is key! If you are having reconstruction as part of your mastectomy surgery, you will also want to direct questions to your plastic surgeon.

Before arriving at the hospital

There may be preparatory steps to complete at home. For example, you may be asked to shower with Hibiclens or antibiotic soap. Nail polish can interfere with monitoring, so you may be asked to arrive with bare nails. Similarly, you'll likely be asked to refrain from wearing deodorant, lotions, perfume. Your physician will advise you on if/when to stop medications and food and drink.

Key Points:

- Follow the pre-surgery requirements from your care team

Surgery Day

The duration of your hospital stay depends on the surgery you are having. It is not uncommon for mastectomy to be an outpatient procedure. Some surgeries require overnight stay. Ask your surgeon how long you will be hospitalized.

You will arrive at the hospital hours before your surgery. You will be admitted to a pre-op room where you'll change into a gown and possibly TED hose. Your nurse will take your vitals and start an IV. There may be labs and radiology procedures (e.g., to prepare for sentinel node biopsy). Your surgeon(s) and the anesthesiologist will meet with you. The surgeon may mark your body with a felt tip pen. Anesthesiologist may pre-medicate you. You are able to keep your eyeglasses but please leave valuables at home, or with a trusted companion.

From your pre-op room you may walk, but likely will be transported to the operating room. You will be awake and likely assist with transferring yourself to the operating table. There are many people present to take care of you. If you have back pain, you might inquire about a pillow under your knees. You will

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not be awake long and will wake up in a PACU or post-op room. The hospital will have a place for your companion to wait during your procedure and immediate recovery, they will rejoin you in your post-op room. Sometimes your companion is able to have prescriptions filled for you, while you are in surgery.

You will recover in a post-op room, and the length of time will vary. Your vitals will be monitored. You may be offered something to eat or drink and need to be able to perform activities such as walking and using the restroom, to be discharged. The nurse will educate you on your aftercare, including topics like drain management and medication. Your post-op nurse is a wealth of information, ask away. Ask to be taught the easiest way to get in/out of bed with minimal discomfort. Depending on your surgical care plan, you may be in a bra or bandages. It is OK to feel overwhelmed about going home and taking over responsibility for your aftercare. Ask questions, express your concerns and make sure that you are instructed in how to reach your providers 24/7.

When you are ready for discharge, you may be transported by wheelchair to the hospital exit. You will need someone to drive you home.

Attire and Comfort Items: This is a day to be comfy. Loose, soft tops that open in front (button, zip, wrap) are important because your arm mobility will be restricted. You may wish to have a drain belt or tops with internal pockets to hold any drains. Some surgical bras have attachments to hold drains. Loose fitting bottoms are recommended because post-op bodies are often bloated. Nonstick socks may be provided. If you are staying at the hospital, you may inquire about bringing your own button up pajamas or robe. Please ask your surgeon if you need to provide a particular post-surgical garment (e.g., mastectomy or sports bra) or if this will be provided.

Depending on the length of your hospital stay, previous mastectomy patients indicated the following comfort items were useful to pack: neck pillow, book/magazine/puzzle book, eyeglasses, cell phone and charger (long charging cords can be useful!), tablet, earplugs/earbuds, lip balm, eye drops, mints, water bottle, freshening up wipes, hairbrush/ties/dry shampoo.

Leaving the Hospital: Please make sure your questions are answered, you understand how to reach your providers with post-op questions and concerns, and that all of your prescriptions are filled. Arrange for a ride home. Your body will be tender, you will appreciate having pillows in the car. There are special mastectomy pillows and seat belt pillows, which you may or may not find useful, and small pillows can be handy in many ways.

Communication: You may want to prepare a plan for keeping loved ones informed. This is a great role to delegate to someone you trust to field questions and provide updates, while maintaining any privacy boundaries that you prefer. You might set up a specific contact list that can be used for text or email, or a web service.

Key Points:

- Plan on being at the hospital a few hours before and after surgery. Each care team will tell you when to arrive and what to expect (some people may even spend a night or two in the hospital).

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- Wear loose soft tops (opening in the front). Mobility will be restricted, and you may not be able to move your arms much.
- Ask questions. Your Post-op Nurse is a wealth of information and can give you advice on how to make things easier at home (getting out of bed, etc). Make sure you also know how to reach your care team with any concerns after you get home.

What to Expect Post-Op

Your surgical care team is your best resource for understanding your post-op physical changes and care needs, but here is advice from other women who have undergone mastectomy procedures. In general, listen to your surgical team, listen to your body and don't rush the healing process. Soreness, tiredness and limited range of motion are common. Your body will look and feel different, and its healing takes time. It is normal to have emotions about bandage and drain removal, and your physical changes.

Medications: Your post-op medications will vary based on procedure and personal needs. Surgery can slow your GI tract, and the stool softeners you've been prescribed are your friend. A chart can be handy for tracking your medication schedule, especially the first few days after surgery.

Drains/At home care: You may have anywhere from zero to eight drains. There are some maintenance tasks to empty, measure and care for your drains. You, and anyone you wish to be involved, will be taught how to care for your drains before you leave the hospital. The drains remain until your fluid output decreases satisfactorily. You may find that your activity level impacts your drain output. Drain removal is quick. Some women experience night sweats in the days following surgery. Keep a list of your symptoms and review them with your provider. Bandaging/incision care will vary based on procedure and provider. Move in the ways your provider recommends, hydrate, nourish your body with healthy foods, and nurture yourself during your healing.

Follow-up care: You will have follow-up appointments with your surgical providers. Use the after hours line if you need guidance outside of office hours. If your surgery involved lymph node removal, discuss the need for lymphedema prevention/management and ask for early referral, as appointments with local lymphedema PT/OTs book well out. In addition to physical needs, you may have additional emotional support needs. If you have been assigned a nurse navigator, they are great resources in navigating this post-surgical time. Your health care system may offer support such as exercise, nutrition, art therapy programming, or an oncology social worker or psychologist. You may find support in the offerings here at Breast Friends.

Key Points:

- Your surgical team is your best resource for understanding your post-op physical changes and care needs
- Know how to care for your drains before going home.
- Make sure you go to your follow up appointments and use the resources available; they will vary from care team to care team.
- Have a stool softener at your house before coming home, it will help after surgery.

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Suggestions for preparing yourself and your home for post-mastectomy healing

Post-op you will have physical limitations that may be new to you. Here are some suggestions other mastectomy patients at Breast Friends have found useful for their homes and routines to facilitate post-mastectomy healing.

Preparing your kitchen, laundry

You may not be able to lift your arms overhead for weeks, your arm and grip strength may be reduced, and you may be restricted in how much you can safely lift. Moving tools and dishes to lower shelves, drawers and counters is helpful. Your grip strength may be reduced, a jar opening tool is handy and paper plates make mealtime clean-up easy. Grabber tools can help you reach items without stretching or bending.

Repetitive motions like chopping may be restricted, and healing can be tiring. It's a great idea to stock up on some freezer meals ahead of time, be receptive to meal train/meal help from others, and stock up on healthy, easy to prepare foods.

Similarly, you will be restricted in how much you can lift. You may move heavy items to smaller containers or temporarily purchase smaller sizes (dog food, laundry soap, milk jugs). Have a plan for groceries, as you will be limited in how heavy a bag you can carry.

Your ability to do some household chores may be temporarily restricted. Chores are a meaningful way for others to assist you during recovery. Extra sheet sets, towels can be useful.

Key Points:

- Move things to lower shelves and into smaller containers, you will not be able to raise your arms over your head for a few weeks and you will be restricted in how heavy of things you can lift.
- You may need help with some household chores, some things may be more difficult to do.

Preparing your bedroom and closet

Review your clothes storage and plan for easy access to the clothes you will need post-op (use lower shelves and rods). Ensure you have easy-on, comfy, front opening tops, button up pajamas. You may also find success with items like stretchy tank tops that you can step into and pull up without lifting or reaching your arms.

Dressing with drains: Your post-mastectomy bra may have drain loops. There are special garments and stand-alone drain belts. Some women use a fanny pack or safety pins (it is nice to have a few larger safety pins handy) and there may be tops in your closet that have interior pockets.

Sleeping: After a mastectomy, sleep can be uncomfortable, and care needs to be taken. Some women find a recliner is ideal for sleeping and resting post-surgery, which will generally require you be propped

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up and on your back. There are pillows that can be used to make your bed suitable for post-op rest, including wedge, u-shaped body pillow, pillow under your knees, little pillows for under your arms. Some women who sleep with partners choose to put a pillow between themselves and their partner to avoid being bumped in the night. Have tablespace chairside or bedside to keep phone, water bottle, remote, book, etc. easily reachable.

Key Points:

- Have easy access to clothes you can wear after surgery. Easy-on, comfy, front opening tops.
- You will have drains in after your surgery and may need special garments to accommodate them.
- Sleeping may be difficult, have options, recliner, extra pillows on your bed, items you use often near you.

Preparing your Bathroom

Showers and bathing may be off limits in the near term. You may want to take care of appointments, such as haircut/color before your surgery date. Freshening wipes/baby wipes, dry shampoo are convenient and useful. When allowed, having someone help with a shampoo (or going to your hairstylist for this) can facilitate hair washing while you are navigating post-op showering restrictions. A drain lanyard (or lanyard with clip) will hold your drains securely during showers. A shower chair and handheld sprayer are handy. You might consider smaller size bottles for shampoo and soap.

Designate a convenient space for your medical care items, such as drain/bandage care items, medicines, medication and drain tracking charts. Disposable gloves and alcohol wipes are needed for tasks such as changing dressings and drain management. You may keep surgical dressing on hand in case your incisions leak (please consult your surgeon for what they recommend). You'll want a wastebasket nearby.

Key Points:

- Take care of appointments (hair/nails) before surgery. Baths may be off limits for awhile.
- Have smaller bottles of supplies on hand so they are easier to lift.
- Have surgical supplies in a convenient place to change bandages.

Breast Friends is here to Support You!

[Breast Friends](#) is here to support you throughout your cancer diagnosis. Our offerings include:

Online support groups

1:1 Mentoring

Hugs program

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Opportunities for community-building with other women experiencing breast cancer diagnosis – creative connections, warrior workshops, nature walks, retreats

Please check out website for a complete list of our programs <https://breastfriends.org/>

External Resources

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61323855d4ee7a2e1f35eb78/t/63288a83406ff07071dd35ec/1663601287678/MastectomyGuide.pdf>

<https://hereforthegirls.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-Breast-Health-Guide.pdf>

Legacy Health- <https://www.legacyhealth.org/>

Providence- <https://www.providence.org/>

OHSU- <https://www.ohsu.edu/health>

Kaiser- <https://thrive.kaiserpermanente.org/care-near-oregon-southwest-washington>

Compass Oncology- <https://www.compassoncology.com/>

Salem Health- <https://www.salemhealth.org/>

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