

## Mastectomy

### AMBULATORY CARE:

**What you need to know about a mastectomy:** A mastectomy is surgery to remove all or part of your breast. Tissue, lymph nodes, or muscle near the breast may also be removed. A mastectomy is done to treat breast cancer and prevent cancer from spreading. A mastectomy can also be done to prevent breast cancer. This may be a choice if you are at high risk for breast cancer. The type of mastectomy you need may depend on the size of the tumor. It may also depend on if the cancer has spread.

**How to prepare for a mastectomy:** Your healthcare provider will talk to you about how to prepare for surgery. He may tell you not to eat or drink anything after midnight on the day of your surgery. He will tell you what medicines to take or not take on the day of your surgery. You may need to stop taking aspirin or blood thinners several days before surgery. Arrange for someone to drive you home and stay with you after surgery. This person can help care for you and watch for complications from surgery.

### What will happen during a mastectomy:

- You will be given general anesthesia to keep you asleep and free from pain during surgery. You may be given an antibiotic through your IV to help prevent a bacterial infection. Your healthcare provider will make an incision over your breast. He will remove the tumor and breast tissue. He may also remove muscle from behind your breast. If lymph nodes will be taken, a small incision will be made in your armpit. The lymph nodes will be removed and tested for cancer.
- One or more drains may be inserted near your incision. A drain removes extra fluid and helps your incision heal. Your healthcare provider will close your incision with stitches and cover it with a bandage. He may also wrap a tight-fitting bandage around both of your breasts. This may decrease swelling, bleeding, and pain.

**What will happen after a mastectomy:** Healthcare providers will monitor you until you are awake. You may need to spend 1 to 2 nights in the hospital. You may have difficulty moving your arm closest to your mastectomy. This should get better in a few days. Get out of bed and walk when your healthcare provider says it is safe. This will help prevent blood clots.

**Risks of a mastectomy:** You may bleed more than expected or get an infection. Nerves, blood vessels, and muscles may be damaged during your surgery. Blood or fluid may collect under your skin. You may need other procedures to remove the fluid or blood. You may have swelling in your arm closest to the mastectomy or where lymph nodes were removed. This swelling is called lymphedema. Lymphedema may cause tingling, numbness, stiffness, and weakness in your arm. This may be permanent. You may get a blood clot in your arm or leg. The blood clot may travel to your heart, lungs, or brain. This may become life-threatening.

### Call 911 for any of the following:

- You feel lightheaded, short of breath, and have chest pain.
- You cough up blood.
- You have trouble breathing.

### Seek care immediately if:

- Blood soaks through your bandage.

- Your stitches come apart.
- Your bruise suddenly gets bigger.
- Your leg or arm is larger than normal and painful.

**Contact your healthcare provider if:**

- You have a fever or chills.
- Your wound is red, swollen, or draining pus.
- You have nausea or are vomiting.
- Your skin is itchy, swollen, or you have a rash.
- Your pain does not get better after you take pain medicine.
- Your drain falls out or stops draining fluid.
- Your drain has pus or foul-smelling fluid coming out of it.
- You have numbness, tingling, or swelling in your arm or hand.
- You feel very sad or anxious.
- You have trouble coping with your condition.
- You have questions or concerns about your condition or care.

**Medicines:** You **may** need any of the following:

- **Antibiotics** help prevent a bacterial infection.
- **Prescription pain medicine** may be given. Ask your healthcare provider how to take this medicine safely. Some prescription pain medicines contain acetaminophen. Do not take other medicines that contain acetaminophen without talking to your healthcare provider. Too much acetaminophen may cause liver damage. Prescription pain medicine may cause constipation.

Ask your healthcare provider how to prevent or treat constipation.

- **NSAIDs** , such as ibuprofen, help decrease swelling, pain, and fever. NSAIDs can cause stomach bleeding or kidney problems in certain people. If you take blood thinner medicine, **always** ask your healthcare provider if NSAIDs are safe for you. Always read the medicine label and follow directions.
- **Take your medicine as directed.** Contact your healthcare provider if you think your medicine is not helping or if you have side effects. Tell him or her if you are allergic to any medicine. Keep a list of the medicines, vitamins, and herbs you take. Include the amounts, and when and why you take them. Bring the list or the pill bottles to follow-up visits. Carry your medicine list with you in case of an emergency.

**Care for your wound as directed:** If you have a tight-fitting bandage, you can remove it in 24 to 48 hours, or as directed. Ask your healthcare provider when your incision can get wet. You may need to take a sponge bath until your drain is removed. Carefully wash around the incision with soap and water. It is okay to allow the soap and water to gently run over your incision. Gently pat dry the area and put on new, clean bandages as directed. Change your bandages when they get wet or dirty. If lymph nodes were removed from your armpit, ask your healthcare provider when you can wear deodorant. Check your incision every day for redness, pus, or swelling.

#### **Self-care:**

- **Apply ice** on your incision for 15 to 20 minutes every hour or as directed. Use an ice pack, or put crushed ice in a plastic bag. Cover it with a towel. Ice helps prevent tissue damage and decreases swelling and pain.
- **Elevate** your arm nearest to your incision above the level of your heart. Do this as often as you can. This will help decrease swelling and pain. Prop your arm on pillows or blankets to keep it elevated comfortably.
- **Rest** as directed. Do not lift anything heavier than 5 pounds. Do not push or pull with your arms. You can use your arms to groom, eat, and bathe. Take short walks around the house. Gradually walk further as you feel better. Ask your healthcare provider when you can return to your normal activities.
- **Do not sleep on your stomach.** This will put too much pressure on your incision. Sleep on your back or on the side opposite to your incision.
- **Empty your drain** as directed. You may need to write down how much fluid you empty from your drain each day. Ask your healthcare provider for more information about how to empty your drain.
- **Wear a supportive bra** as directed. Wait until you remove the tight-fitting bandage to wear a bra. You may be given a surgical bra or told to wear a sports bra. A supportive bra may help hold your bandages in place. It may also help with swelling and pain. **Do not** wear bras with lace or underwire. They may rub against your incision and cause discomfort.

**Arm stretches:** Your healthcare provider may show you how to do arm stretches. Arm stretches may prevent stiff arms or shoulders. You may need to wait until after your drains are removed to begin stretching. Do not do arm stretches until your healthcare provider says it is okay. Ask your healthcare provider for more information about arm stretches.

**More information and support:** You may have difficulty coping with the changes to your body. Talk to your family or friends about how you are feeling. Ask your healthcare provider about support groups. It may be helpful to talk with other women who have had a mastectomy.

- American Cancer Society  
250 Williams Street  
Atlanta , GA 30303  
Phone: 1- 800 - 227-2345  
Web Address: <http://www.cancer.org>
- National Cancer Institute  
6116 Executive Boulevard, Suite 300  
Bethesda , MD 20892-8322  
Phone: 1- 800 - 422-6237  
Web Address: <http://www.cancer.gov>

**Follow up with your healthcare provider as directed:** Write down your questions so you remember to ask them during your visits.

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