

Breast reconstruction

“Symmetrization” and reconstruction of the nipple and areola



After breast reconstruction, it is often necessary to operate on the breast that hasn't been reconstructed to make it as similar as possible to the other. Your nipples and areolas can also be reconstructed if they were removed. This fact sheet explains this process.

What is “symmetrization”?

After one of your breasts is reconstructed, you may need surgery to reshape the other one as well. The aim of this surgery is to make your breasts as similar as possible in volume, shape, and height. This is called “symmetrization”.



When will this surgery be done?

Usually this is done no sooner than 3 months after the reconstruction.

This time is longer **if** you have cancer treatments, in which case it will be at least:

- 6 weeks after the last dose of chemotherapy
- 6 months after the last radiation therapy session

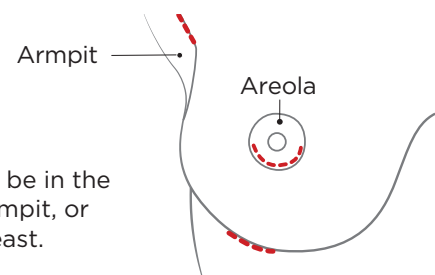
What technique will be used?

There are 3 possible techniques. The plastic surgeon will recommend the one that is best for you. You will be “asleep” during this surgery (that is, under general anaesthesia).

Technique 1 - Breast augmentation

This option is proposed when the breast that has not been operated on is smaller than the reconstructed breast.

A permanent silicone gel implant is inserted into the non-operated breast. The size of the implant depends on the size of the reconstructed breast.

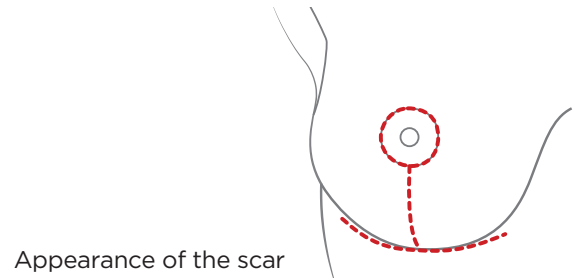


The scar may be in the areola, the armpit, or under the breast.

Technique 2 - Breast reduction

This option is proposed when the breast that has not been operated on is larger than the reconstructed breast.

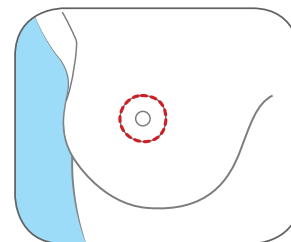
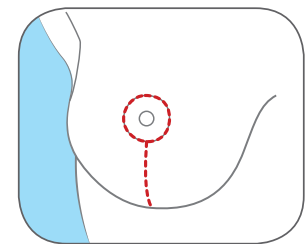
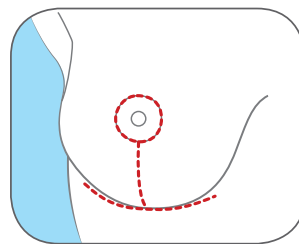
The surgeon removes tissue from inside your breast (the breast gland), as well as the excess skin. Your breast will look firmer and well supported.



Technique 3 - Breast "redraping"

This option is proposed when the non-operated breast is sagging and the nipple and areola are in the wrong position. This sagging is called "breast ptosis".

In this surgery, some skin is removed and the nipple and areola are pulled up. The breast will look rounder.

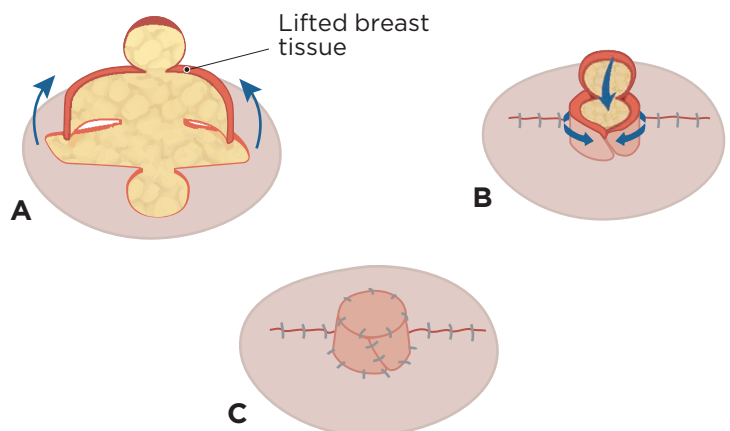


How is the nipple reconstructed?

Nipple reconstruction is done no sooner than 3 months after your last surgery. This gives the breasts time to settle into their natural position. In fact, after reconstruction, the breasts tend to fall a little. The surgeon wants to wait to be sure the nipples and areolas of both breasts can be positioned in the same place.

The nipple is formed using tissue from either the reconstructed breast or the other nipple. For this surgery, your breast(s) will be "frozen" (that is, using local anesthesia). There are 3 possible techniques to reconstruct the nipple.

- 1 Flap.** Part of the skin and some of the fat from your reconstructed breast are lifted (A) and then folded (B) to form the new nipple (C).



2 Graft. Part of the nipple of the non-operated breast is used to form the nipple of the reconstructed breast.

3 Tattooing. A drawing tattooed on the tip of your reconstructed breast can give an effect of depth or the illusion of a nipple in three dimensions. Over time, the colour of the tattoo may fade a little. It is possible to have a touch-up done.

The surgeon will evaluate which technique is best for your situation.

How is the areola reconstructed?

It is reconstructed using tattooing. This is done.

- > No sooner than 3 months after a nipple reconstruction that is done using the flap or graft technique.
- > Or at the same time as the nipple, if the nipple is created using tattooing.



Natural areola

Tattooed areola

Some women also choose to wear an artificial nipple (“stick-on” or adhesive nipple).

Artificial nipples (adhesive)



How long will it take?

- **Breast symmetrization** is done in day surgery. It takes 1 to 3 hours. After the surgery, you will be monitored until you are fully awake. You will have a bandage. Since you will have had anesthesia and medication, be sure someone is with you for your return home.

- **Nipple reconstruction with a flap or graft** is done in day surgery. It takes about half an hour. You will have one or two bandages. Be sure to have someone with you for your return home.
- **Reconstruction of the nipple and areola by tattooing** is done by the plastic surgeon, a tattoo artist, or a nurse. It takes about half an hour. You will have one or two bandages.

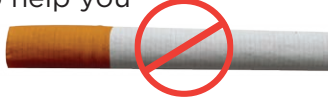


NOTE

All of these surgeries and tattoos are covered by the Quebec Health Insurance Plan (RAMQ).

Are there any precautions to take BEFORE these surgeries?

To reduce the risk of complications, you will need to:

- stop smoking for 6 weeks before and 6 weeks after each surgery. Nicotine (including electronic cigarettes and patches) decreases blood flow and impairs healing. There are resources to help you quit smoking. Talk to your care team. 
- stop taking all blood-thinning medications (aspirin, anti-inflammatories, or natural products) 10 days before and 10 days after each surgery. These products increase the risk of bleeding.

What follow-up will there be AFTER the surgery?

You should keep the bandages clean and dry until your next visit to the clinic (5 to 7 days after the surgery). The surgeon will change your bandages and explain what you need to do.

What are the potential problems?

For breast symmetrization:

- swelling of the breast
- bruising of the breast
- difficulty raising your arm on the operated side
- pain at the site of the incision

For nipple reconstruction (flap or graft):

- change in direction of the nipple (pointing less forward) after the first 6 months
- infection
- loss of part or all of the flap or graft (necrosis)

What symptoms should I watch for?

- fever of 38,5°C/100.9°F) and higher
- more redness, heat, or swelling in your incision
- yellow or greenish discharge from the incision
- bad smell from the incision
- pain that stays for more than 3 months, is not relieved with medication, or keeps coming back

If you have any of these symptoms, contact your care team.

What precautions should I take AFTER my surgery?

After breast symmetrization:

- Rest. Take time off from work for 7 to 10 days.
- Don't do any sports for 1 or 2 months.
- Wait until the incision has healed (the scar is closed) before wetting your operated breast.
- Don't wear an underwire bra for 3 months after the surgery.



After nipple reconstruction (flap or graft):

- No time off work is needed.
- Don't do any sports for a week, or follow your surgeon's recommendations.
- Wait until the incision has healed (the scar is closed) before wetting your nipple.

Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

If you have questions, don't hesitate to contact your care team and your assigned nurse.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Quebec Breast Cancer Foundation:

> rubanrose.org/en

The Quebec Breast Cancer Foundation is proud to help inform and support women during breast reconstruction, thanks to a grant for this project.

Breast reconstruction at the CHUM:

> cicc.chumontreal.qc.ca

Click on: I have cancer → Breast (CICS) → Reconstruction

Centre des maladies du sein

Deschênes-Fabia : (French only)

> centredesmaladiesdusein.ca

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site

chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
chumontreal.qc.ca



Questions

Write down any questions you want to ask your care team so you don't forget anything.



Here are some examples of questions you might ask your care team or nurse to help you make decisions and prepare for your surgery:

- > Will I have to wear a support bra after breast symmetrization?
- > Will I have drains after the surgery?
- > Where can I get artificial nipples?
- > Will I still have erogenous sensations in my breasts and nipples?
- > Will I be able to wear an underwire bra, and if so, when?



Observations - Comments

Write down observations you feel are important: your symptoms, treatments, follow-up, energy level, spirit, etc.





Upcoming appointments



Resource people and contacts

Write down phone numbers, email addresses and websites that could be useful.