

# Taking care of yourself after breast surgery



You'll be going home soon after your breast surgery. This fact sheet gives you information to help you take care of yourself in the weeks ahead.

## IMPORTANT points to know

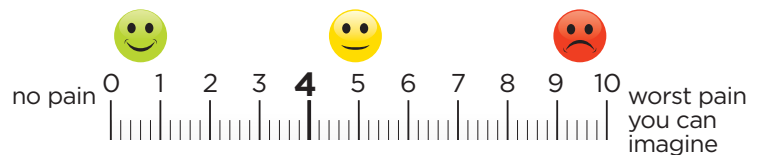
- Make sure you have someone to take you home.
- It is a good idea to have a relative or friend available, if needed, to help you during the 24 to 48 hours after surgery.
- For your comfort, you can wear a sports bra or one without wires. Wear it day and night for a few days, as long as you feel the need.

## Is it normal to have pain after breast surgery?

Yes, your incision can hurt. The pain will be strongest in the first 24 to 48 hours after surgery. Then it will get less painful day by day.

## How can I relieve my pain?

Most of the time, the pain medicines (analgesics) prescribed by your doctor will provide good pain relief. After a few days, acetaminophen (an over-the-counter painkiller such as Tylenol or Atasol), may be enough.



**Caution:** The worse the pain, the harder it is to relieve. Take your medicine before the pain becomes too severe (4, on a pain scale from 0 to 10).

Some pain medications cause side effects such as drowsiness, nausea (heartburn), or constipation. If this happens to you, talk with your pharmacist, nurse, or doctor.



**Don't put up with pain. The less pain you have, the sooner you can be active and recover.**

## How do I take care of my incision?

There are different ways for the doctor to close your incision.

- **Dissolvable stitches.** These don't need to be taken out. They will go away on their own over time.
- **Non-dissolvable stitches or staples.** These will be removed at a future visit to the clinic or CLSC.

The doctor might also apply **butterfly bandages** after closing the incision or when taking out the stitches or staples. These help with healing and improve the appearance of the scar.

**Don't remove them.** They fall off most of the time on their own. It's normal for them to still be in place at your first medical visit after the surgery, and even later.

Before you leave the hospital, the nurse will tell you when and how to remove your bandage and how to care for your incision.



**If you have a scar under your arm, put your forearm on a pillow whenever you sit or lie down during the first week. This allows better air flow. The incision stays dry and heals better.**

For a nicer scar, you can massage it when the incision is healed. Talk to your doctor or nurse at your follow-up visit. See the fact sheet [\*\*\*Taking care of my scars with massage.\*\*\*](#)

## What should I do if fluid builds up near my incision?

After surgery, fluid might build up under the skin near the incision. This can form a lump, more or less soft and of variable size. This is called a "seroma".

This happens often and is not dangerous. The fluid and the lump will go away by themselves, little by little, in the weeks that follow. However, if the seroma is large and bothers you a lot, don't hesitate to discuss it with the clinic nurse. The doctor can remove the fluid with a syringe.

## Can I take a bath or shower?

For as long as you have a bandage or drains:

- don't take a bath or shower
- wash yourself at the sink with a wash cloth
- after your drains are removed, wait 48 hours more before taking a shower

If your incision is not bandaged:

- you can take a shower, but don't aim the spray toward your incision
- water can run gently over the incision: this helps to keep it clean



In all cases, to reduce the risk of infection, don't take a bath for at least 2 weeks after surgery. Also, before taking a bath, make sure the incision is closed tightly. If necessary, ask your doctor or clinic nurse for advice on this.

## Can I use soap?

During the week after surgery, don't put any soap directly on the incision.

After this first week, you can use a mild soap, without oil or perfume. Rinse the incision thoroughly with clean water. Continue using this soap until your incision is completely healed.

## When will I be able to get back to my normal activities?

As soon as you are home, you can get back to your activities and use your arm on the operated side. Do whatever you feel you can do, and respect the following instructions.

- Don't lift objects heavier than 5 pounds (2.5 kg) with your arm on the operated side, such as a full handbag. Follow this instruction until your next medical visit.
- Do the exercises that the physiotherapist has shown you. See fact sheet [Recovering from breast surgery with exercises](#).
- Get help for any tasks that are less easy or that take too long, and accept help from others.

## When can I become sexually active again?

You can as soon as you feel ready. Adapt your activities to the sensitivity of your breasts.

Some women don't feel like having sex after breast surgery. Many see their body in a new way. They may think they are less desirable or attractive. If you feel this way, discuss your concerns with your partner: this may help you get back to an active sex life.



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If you are not comfortable with your new appearance or if you are having trouble getting back to a fulfilling sex life, talk to your nurse or doctor. A sexologist is also available to help you.



## Can I do exercise and sports?

### > During 3 to 4 weeks after surgery

Don't do any sports or activities that require physical effort, cause pain, or make your breasts move a lot (such as golf, tennis, aerobics, etc.). After this time, you can start all these activities again, but avoid any that hurt.

### > Until the incision is completely healed

Don't swim in public pools or lakes.

## Can I drive my car?

Some pain medications cause drowsiness or have effects similar to intoxication. You are therefore not allowed to drive for 8 hours after taking them. Discuss this with your pharmacist.

## What signs and symptoms should I watch out for?

Contact your doctor or nurse quickly in any of the following cases:

- fever of 38.3°C (101°F) or higher



- increased redness, heat or swelling of your incision
- yellow or greenish discharge from the incision
- bad smell from the incision
- pain that doesn't decrease over time, isn't relieved by prescribed medication, or returns

## Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

Call the clinic nurse, Monday to Friday between 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m.

> **514 890-8000, extension 14319**

Outside of business hours, call:

> **514 890-8086**

This support service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. When calling, be sure to have your health insurance card on hand.



## USEFUL RESOURCES

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](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)



## NOTEPAD



### Questions

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### Resource people and contacts

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

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