4 Tips for Breast Cancer Surgery Recovery

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

Breast Cancer Surgery Recovery Time: What to Expect

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), breast cancer is the world's most prevalent cancer. Between 2016 and 2020, worldwide, there were 7.8 million women who had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Historically, breast cancer has been treated surgically, with a mastectomy. Though a mastectomy is still a common treatment for breast cancer, most cancers can now be treated with a lumpectomy, allowing for the breast cancer to be removed while preserving the breast. However, no matter the procedure used, recovery is still important. Here's our guide breast cancer surgery recovery time. We discuss the healing process and things you can do to remain comfortable.

Breast Cancer Surgery

There are various surgical options for treating breast cancer. Your oncologist and surgeon will recommend the best option for you, based on the type and stage of your breast cancer.

- **Breast-conserving surgery (BSC):** also known as a lumpectomy, partial mastectomy, quadrantectomy and segmental mastectomy. BSC is performed to preserve breast tissue while removing the cancerous tumor. Though some breast tissue is removed, the amount that is removed depends on the size and the location of the tumor.
- **Mastectomy:** performed to remove the entire breast, along with surrounding tissues. This type of surgery is often performed when the cancer is more advanced, when the tumor is large, or when the cancer has returned after being in remission.
- **Lymph node removals:** these are often performed during BSCs and mastectomies. Typically, the lymph node in the armpit is removed, allowing for visualization in a lab. This allows your team to determine the stage of your cancer and see if the cancer has spread to other areas.

Stages of Healing

Your healing process will depend on the extent of your surgery. For example, a lumpectomy to remove a small tumor will take less time to heal than someone who has required a double mastectomy.

The Wound

The surgical wound is typically closed with sutures that will dissolve over two to three weeks. Occasionally, traditional sutures are used, and they will be removed at an outpatient appointment in 7 to 10 days. The wound typically takes two to three weeks to heal, though you may notice bruising and swelling. The wound itself, even after it has healed, may be sensitive and raised. It will flatten and lighten over time.

Wound Drains

It is common for a wound drain to be placed into your surgical site. This allows for fluids to drain from your surgical site, aiding in healing. You can go home with the drain in place. You should have written instructions on caring for the drain. It will be removed by a nurse or your surgeon at a follow-up appointment.

Exercises

Though it may be painful to think about, your surgical team will likely request that you perform certain exercises after a BSC or mastectomy. In fact, you may even start these exercises the day of your surgery.

These exercises help to reduce swelling and pain in your arm and breast. They also promote movement in your arm and shoulder.

Your team will give you instructions on which exercises to perform and how often you should perform them.

Top 4 Tips for Recovery

1. Vitamins and Supplements

It may be tempting to empty the vitamin aisle at your store prior to breast surgery. However, you should discuss this with your oncologist, as certain vitamins can interact with medications that you may be prescribed. For example, vitamin C is known for its healing properties. However, it can reduce the effectiveness of tamoxifen, as well as various targeted therapies.

Vitamins and supplements may be recommended to treat nutritional deficiencies, especially if you suffer from cancer cachexia. Your provider can recommend specific supplements in these instances.

One supplement does seem to stand out, in all types of cancer: vitamin D. Many of us are deficient in vitamin D, regardless of our health status. It is likely that your provider may recommend a vitamin D supplement.

2. Take Medications Exactly as Prescribed

Though it may seem like a great option to use alternative treatments to ease pain and healing, you should also take your medications as prescribed by your surgeon – specifically pain medications. When used as prescribed, pain medications are a great tool. They will keep you comfortable and allow you to perform the exercises as recommended and generally feel well during your recovery.

3. Select the Right Bra

It may seem painful, but a bra can improve pain levels, especially when sleeping. A post-mastectomy bra or post-mastectomy camisole can help to support the chest. These bras and camisoles are designed in a way that allows for support without pinching or binding at the surgical site. Be sure to discuss bras and camisoles with your surgeon – they will likely recommend a timeframe for when you should start wearing them.

4. Finding Support

Although your family and friends may be a great source of support during your healing period, it is also helpful to find support from those who know what you are going through. You can find support from other breast cancer survivors by asking your friends and family to put you in touch with others who have or had breast cancer. You can also find support groups on Facebook. Your oncologist and surgeon may also know of support groups in your area.