

Mastectomy for Breast Cancer: Returning Home

After you have a mastectomy, your body needs time to heal.

You may need several weeks—or longer—to get back to your daily routine.

The amount of time it takes you to recover depends on your situation and the type of surgery you had.

Here are some things you can do to help yourself heal and avoid problems.

For the first few days after surgery, you'll probably feel tired and sore.

You also may feel some pulling or stretching when you move your arm.

Rest when you need to, and try to get enough sleep.

You may feel most comfortable sleeping on the side that wasn't operated on or on your back.

You can use a pillow for support.

You may have a special bandage, called a binder, around your chest.

It may help ease swelling and pain.

Your doctor will tell you how long to keep it on.

You'll also have one or two tubes, called drains, in the area where you had surgery.

They collect fluid.

Before you leave the hospital, you'll get instructions on how to care for your drains and your incisions.

You'll need to keep your incisions clean and dry.

Follow your doctor's instructions on when you can take a shower or bath.

Your doctor will probably prescribe pain medicine and maybe an antibiotic.

Take your medicines exactly as directed.

If you have any problems with your medicines, talk to your doctor.

Some medicines make it unsafe for you to drive.

Your doctor can tell you when it's safe to start driving again.

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Walking is good for you.

It can help prevent blood clots and other problems, like constipation.

Try to walk a little more each day.

You'll learn some gentle exercises to help prevent swelling and stiffness in your arm.

But as you're healing, you'll need to be careful with your upper body.

Don't lift anything heavy, like a pet, a child, or a heavy bag of any kind.

And avoid strenuous activities that use the upper body, such as biking, jogging, weightlifting, and certain chores.

Ask your doctor when you can get back to doing your regular activities.

And remember, your doctor will also let you know when you can start driving again.

Now, as you heal, you'll need to watch for problems.

Call your doctor if you have signs of infection, such as increased pain, swelling, warmth, or redness; reddish streaks leading from the incision; pus draining from the incision; or a fever.

And call your doctor if you have other problems, such as new or worse pain; sudden swelling of your arm, hands, or fingers; or bright red blood that soaks through your bandage.

This may seem like a lot to do, but all these things are important.

They can help you heal and stay out of the hospital.

And if you have any other questions or concerns, you can always call your doctor.