

Title:

Breast Cancer Treatment: Coping With A Mastectomy

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979

Summary:

A breast cancer survivor speaks on the reality of mastectomies and strategies for coping.

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Article Body:

As women, especially American women, much of our femininity is centered on our breasts. No matter where you look, there are pictures, billboards, commercials, television shows, and movies with women with these beautiful breasts and ample cleavage. The thought of losing one or both breasts, to breast cancer, can be devastating for many of us. Sure, there's reconstruction, but will it ever really look the same again? Even if you have reconstruction, you'll never have sensation there again and, for many of us, that definitely affects our sexuality.

I went through two separate mastectomies, for my breast cancer, despite the fact that I wanted them both done at the same time. Two different surgeons told me that wasn't necessary. They found out, later, that it was, as I had the same breast cancer in both breasts. Through these surgeries, I learned a few things about what to expect, and how to get up and running again, after a mastectomy for breast cancer.

The first thing to realize is that, apart from the emotional aspect of such an operation, this is a simple surgery. The breast is composed, mostly, of fatty tissue and, of course, milk ducts and lobes. The removal of this breast tissue is way easier than operating on an organ, but carries much more emotional impact for most of us. Most surgeons will get as much of the breast tissue out as they can to help alleviate the chance of a recurrence of your breast cancer. You will typically wind up with a horizontal scar about four inches long. The scar may be red for quite a while but, ultimately, should fade to where you can hardly see it anymore.

You want to be sure to take loose-fitting, button-down shirts (raiding your

hubby's closet is helpful) with you, to the hospital, as you won't be able to raise your arms over your head for a while. You will also need a sports bra and I would highly recommend one that fastens in the front. They will put that on you after your surgery. Typically, you should be able to stay in the hospital for one night. If you're going to have lymph nodes removed, a small pillow, to slip under that arm, will help make you more comfortable. Check with your local American Cancer Society as they may have small pillows for you. An extra pillow to hold to your chest, if you need to cough, sneeze, or laugh, can help keep your incision from hurting.

When you wake up, you will have a couple of drain tubes for each side you have done. These tubes are important as they allow the excess fluid, which your body will produce, to drain out. If you didn't have them, the fluid would have to be aspirated with a needle. The drains, even though they're no fun, are better than that. These drains will have to be emptied a couple of times a day and you will have to write down how much fluid you drain so the doctor will know when you've slowed down enough to remove them. You may not know where to put these drains under your clothing. I pinned mine up to the sports bra and that way, they didn't pull when I moved.

When you get home, plan on having someone there to help you for the first few days. You won't be allowed to reach into your cabinets and definitely won't be able to clean house or pick up your children, if you have little ones. You'll be sent home with pain meds and definitely take them if you need them. Studies show that you will heal faster if you keep yourself out of pain, so don't be afraid to take them as prescribed.

If you have a recliner, you might consider moving it into the bedroom as you won't be able to lie flat for a while. You'll need to sleep in a partial sitting position. If you don't have one, or don't have space for it in your bedroom, lots of pillows will work, too. That's what I used. Just be sure you have enough pillows to keep yourself comfortable propped up.

If you would like someone who's been there before you to visit with, be sure to call your local American Cancer Society and ask for a Reach 2 Recovery volunteer. This is an American Cancer Society program where they try to match you with one of their volunteers who have as similar experience as you're facing. This woman will come visit you and will bring you all sorts of brochures and information on conventional treatment. She will also bring you a list of exercises you can start to do to regain your mobility and range of motion.

This is VERY important. It hurts to stretch your arm up, after surgery, but if

you haven't had reconstruction, and you don't start soon, you will lose that range of motion. I would recommend starting to gently, slowly reach your arm up ... let your body be your guide ... the day after your surgery. This is ONLY if you have not had reconstruction. If you have, let your plastic surgeon tell you when to start stretching. Push to where it hurts just a little, but do not push too far past that. Little by little, you'll find yourself able to stretch a little farther every couple of days.

Most of all, allow yourself to heal emotionally, as well as physically. Some of us just can't look at that incision right away. That's OK. Take as much time as you need. I know I felt like some kind of freak with no breasts and, even six years later, I still do sometimes. But remind yourself that these scars are your battle scars. They do not make you less of a woman. They make you a warrior.