

# After Breast Surgery



MASSACHUSETTS  
GENERAL HOSPITAL

CANCER CENTER

## WHEN TO CALL YOUR DOCTOR OR NURSE

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Call the Center for Breast Cancer at 617-726-6500, or your surgeon, if you notice any of these symptoms:

- Red skin around an incision
- Drainage from an incision
- Temperature above 100.5° F

This booklet tells you what to expect and how to care for yourself while recovering from breast surgery. You will learn how to manage any pain you may have and how to care for your incisions and drains. Be sure to follow any specific instructions your surgeon gives you.

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## Tips to Keep You Comfortable after Surgery

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### How will I feel?

It is normal to feel tired for a few weeks after surgery. Your body will use a lot of its energy to heal from surgery. Make sure you get plenty of rest, eat well, and let others do things for you.

Most people feel upset after breast cancer surgery. Common feelings are worry, anger, and loss. Healing physically and emotionally takes time. Ask for support from others.

We are here to help you. Please call the Center for Breast Cancer at 617-726-6500 with any questions about your recovery.

### Clothing

Wear loose, comfortable clothes that do not put any pressure on your chest or arm. If you have surgical drains, be sure your clothes do not pull or catch on the drains. A blouse or shirt that buttons in front may be the easiest to wear. Always start with the operated side first when you put on clothing.

You may wear a bra if you did not have reconstructive surgery. A bra that fastens in the front may be easier to put on. Consider wearing a soft, loose camisole or T-shirt instead of a bra.

If you had reconstructive surgery, check with your plastic surgeon about when you may start wearing a bra.

### Supporting your arm

Your arm can pull or put pressure on the area of your breast surgery. To support your arm in a comfortable position, put a pillow or folded towel under or behind your elbow when you are sitting or lying down. Sometimes a pillow on your lap or over your abdomen can help, too.

### Riding in the car

Place a small pillow between the seat belt and your chest to lessen any rubbing or pressure on the surgical area.

## Medications for Pain

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You will be given a prescription for pain medication to take for several days after surgery. **It is important to take the pain medicine as soon as you begin to feel uncomfortable.** This will make it easier to control any pain you have. Follow the directions on the pill bottle and do not take more than is directed.

While you are taking prescription pain medication:

### Do Not

- Drive
- Drink Alcohol
- Do activities that require concentration or coordination

Prescription pain medicine can cause constipation. Drink plenty of water to help prevent this side effect. You can take a stool softener like Colace® to prevent or treat constipation.

Within a few days after surgery, over-the-counter medications such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Motrin,® Advil®) should keep you comfortable. As you have less pain, decrease or stop these medications.

If you have surgical drains, check with your nurse or doctor before taking ibuprofen or aspirin.

## How to Care for Your Incisions

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- Keep your incision covered and dry as instructed by your surgeon.
- Ask your surgeon when it is ok to take a shower. Once they tell you it is ok to shower, your incision and paper tapes (steri-strips) on the incision can get wet.
- After the first two days (48 hours), your incision and the paper tapes (steri-strips) on the incision can get wet.
- You can gently wash the incision area and pat it dry.
- The incisions can stay open to the air. You may keep gauze over them if you find this more comfortable.
- The steri-strips over the incision will start curling up at the ends after a few days. When steri-strips curl at either end, they are ready to be removed. (Not all surgeons use steri-strips).

It is normal to have thickening or firmness in the skin along your incision(s). After two to three months the area around the scar will soften.

After drains and steri-strips are removed, you may massage your skin with lotion, vitamin E cream, or aloe.

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## Deodorant and Shaving

- Do not use deodorant for the first 5 days after surgery if you have incisions under your arm. Be sure your incision has no open areas before you begin using deodorant.
- Wait at least two weeks after surgery before shaving your underarm.

## How to Manage Your Surgical Drains

Drains are soft, plastic tubes placed in the area of your surgery to drain away fluid that collects under the skin as you heal. The drains are attached to suction bulbs where the fluid collects. The amount of fluid that collects each day will slowly decrease. The color of the drainage will change from red to reddish-yellow, then to a yellowish-white color.



Depending on the type of operation you had, one or more drains may have been put in by your surgeon.

### Managing your drains

There are five things you will need to do with each drain:

1. “Milk” the drain so that it does not clog
2. Empty the suction bulb and measure the amount of fluid in it
3. Keep a record of the amount of fluid that collects in each suction bulb
4. Change the drain dressings daily
5. Follow your surgeon’s instructions for keeping the drain sites dry



### “Milking” the drain tubing

It is common for clots to form in the tubing which will clog the drain. To keep the tube open, you need to “milk” it at least twice a day. “Milking” the drain means sliding your pinched fingers along the tubing to push any clots down into the suction bulb.

How to “milk” a drain:

1. With one hand, hold the drain tube in place close to the skin. Pinch it firmly so it doesn’t move or pull your skin.
2. With the other hand, pinch your thumb and index finger around the tube. Slide your pinched fingers along the tubing, pulling downward to push the fluid toward the suction bulb.
3. Start at the top, close to the drain insertion site and go all the way down the tube.

## Emptying the Drains

Empty each drain twice a day, or more if the suction bulb gets full.

Record the amount of fluid in each drain separately. Use the drainage record at the end of this pamphlet.

## How to empty the suction bulb



1. Open the plug at the top of the suction bulb.
2. Pour the fluid from the bulb into the measuring cup. Squeeze the bulb to empty it completely.
3. Measure the amount of fluid. Write down the amount of fluid from each drain separately.
4. Squeeze the air out of the bulb and close the plug. The sides of the bulb should be indented.  
This is what creates the suction to draw out the fluid.
5. After measuring and recording the amount of fluid, you can flush the fluid down the toilet.

Call for an appointment to have the drain removed when the amount of fluid collected over 24 hours is less than 30cc for two consecutive days. (The cup is marked.)

## How to Change the Drain Dressings

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The dressings around your drains need to be changed every day. Change dressings more often if they are wet or dirty.

### Drain care supplies:

To change the dressing you will need scissors, tape, and gauze with a slit to fit around the drain. Before changing your dressing gather the following supplies:

- Gauze dressings for the drains
- Paper or plastic tape
- Plastic measuring cups
- Safety pins or a thin cloth tape to secure the drains
- Scissors for cutting the gauze and tape

### How to change a dressing:

1. Wash your hands.
2. Cut a slit in the gauze from the edge into the center.
3. Cut several pieces of tape.
4. Remove the old dressing and tape.
5. Place the new dressing around the drain site.
6. Hold the dressing with one hand and tape it with the other hand.

## Bathing and Drains

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### If your surgeon tells you to keep your drain sites dry:

- You may not take a shower until the day after your drain(s) have been removed.
- You may take a sponge bath or bathe in a shallow tub splashing or dabbing water on your incision(s), but keeping the drain sites dry.

### If your surgeon lets you shower:

- Remove all dressings
- Use a string to tie the drain bulb around your waist
- Take a brief shower and pat yourself dry

Whether you take a shower or a tub bath, put on a fresh dry dressing afterward.



# Removing the Drains

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The drains will be removed by your surgeon when the amount of fluid collected over 48 hours decreases to 30 cc or less. This usually takes seven to fourteen days.

- Until your drains are removed you will need to care for them and write down the amount of fluid that collects.
- When the drainage decreases to 30 cc or less in a 48-hour period, you will call the Center for Breast Cancer or your surgeon's office to schedule an appointment to have the drain removed. We can usually see you within 24 hours of your call.

A drain can remain an extra day or two, but it is important not to remove it too early.

### After the drain or drains are removed:

Keep a piece of gauze over the drain site until there has been no spotting on the gauze for 24 hours. This is usually 2 to 3 days after the drain is removed.

### Special Instructions

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## Post-Surgery Drainage Record

Bring your Drainage Record to your drain removal office visit.

DAY 1	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 7	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 13	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 2	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 8	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 14	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 3	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 9	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 15	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 4	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 10	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 16	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 5	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 11	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 17	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 6	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 12	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		

DAY 18	DATE:	
	DRAIN 1	DRAIN 2
A.M.		
P.M.		
OTHER		
TOTAL		





## Cancer Center Community Providers

Through our network of collaborations, patients have access to the latest cancer treatments and targeted therapies, early phase clinical trials, timely referrals for second opinions, and improved coordination of care.

Visit [massgeneral.org/cancer/community](http://massgeneral.org/cancer/community) or ask your care team for more information about what services are offered at each site.

### Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center

55 Fruit Street, Boston, MA 02114 | 877-726-5130

**Mass General Cancer Center at Emerson Hospital – Bethke**  
131 ORNAC, John Cuming Building, Suite 200  
Concord, MA 01742 | 978-287-3436

**Mass General/North Shore Cancer Center**  
102 Endicott Street,  
Danvers, MA 01923 | 978-882-6060

**Mass General Cancer Center at Newton-Wellesley Hospital**  
2014 Washington Street,  
Newton, MA 02462 | 617-219-1200

**Mass General Cancer Center at Cooley Dickinson Hospital**  
30 Locust Street, Northampton, MA 01061 | 413-582-2900

**Mass General Hematology/Oncology Service at Martha's Vineyard Hospital**  
1 Hospital Road, Oak Bluffs,  
MA 02557 | 508-693-0410

**Mass General Hematology/Oncology Service at Nantucket Cottage Hospital**  
57 Prospect Street, Nantucket,  
MA 02554 | 508-825-8100

**Mass General Radiation and Hematology/Oncology Services at Exeter Hospital**  
5 Alumni Drive, Exeter, NH 03833  
603-580-7336

**Mass General Hematology/Oncology Service at Southern New Hampshire Medical Center**  
8 Prospect Street, Nashua,  
NH 03060 | 603-577-3089

**Mass General Cancer Center at Mass General Waltham**  
52 Second Avenue, Suite 1110  
Waltham, MA 02451 | 781-487-6100