

Breast Reconstruction Recovery

Overall

Make no mistake – breast reconstruction is major surgery. Whether it's done immediately after your cancer surgery or decades later, it's still major surgery. Whether you've decided to have breast reconstruction with your own tummy or back tissues or with an implant, it's still major surgery. Whether you had both breasts operated on or just one, it's still major surgery. It doesn't matter if you're seventy years old or twenty years old. It doesn't matter if you have cancer or if you're choosing to do something prophylactically. It's still major surgery. Remind yourself of that. Remind your family of that. But congratulations – the first hurdle has been cleared!

Hospital Recovery

Not every woman that undergoes breast reconstruction needs to stay in the hospital, but most will spend at least a couple nights. I typically quote “one night for each side we operate on”, but everyone is different. You may want or need a couple days away from home – if that's the case, just let me know.

Hospitals can be wonderful places to recover immediately after surgery, but they can also have their drawbacks. Hospitals can be noisy and can interfere with your ability to rest well. You can get frustrated when nurses and doctors and techs keep coming in your room checking your temperature and blood pressure. The beds aren't always the most comfortable. The food may not taste very good. Hospitals for some can be annoying places that they can't leave quickly enough. Just remind yourself – everyone is there to help you. Everyone is also there to listen to you. Speak up. If you need something, ask. If you want some peace and quiet, ask them to skip that next check up and give you some uninterrupted time to rest. Remember – you are in charge and no one knows what you need more than you do. Hospital staff cannot read your mind.

Surgical Site

All of your surgical incisions get closed with layers of suture. Most of the sutures will dissolve on their own, but some need to be removed or trimmed in clinic. This is usually done around 1-2 weeks after surgery. You may have some drainage from the incisions – this is typically normal. If your dressings get soaked or are leaking on your clothes, either tell the nurse or call our office and we can instruct you on what to do next. If your drainage changes or your incisions get red and swollen, notify us immediately. This could be the sign of an infection, which if addressed early, be managed with antibiotics alone and have no long term sequelae. Also, let us know if any part of your incision opens up or separates. We can't help if we don't know there's a problem, and a lot of time there is a simple solution.

How Things Look

At first, your breasts may look very unnatural or even scary. DO NOT PANIC – this should be the expectation in the early stages. Tissues get swollen, they bruise, your incisions are fresh and alarming, drains may be in which causes the breast to stick down in funny ways and you may have a partially-filled expander in that makes everything look crazy. Again – DO NOT PANIC. This is a process. Tissues need to heal and that takes time. If I could get you to not look down for a few weeks, I would – although some women look amazing right from the get-go. I will always be honest and forthright with you. Our goal is to make the new you just as beautiful as you were before surgery. Our ambition is to make you look and feel even better.

Drains

No one likes them and some people flat-out hate them. They do serve an important purpose though. They keep fluid from accumulating and that's a very good thing. Bacteria love the fluid that accumulates after surgery (it can be rich in protein which is a food source for them). We don't love bacteria, so we certainly don't want to give them what they want. Removing the fluid also decreases the pressure on your tissues which promotes blood flow and improves healing. For these two reasons, drains are very important and are on our side!

You will be responsible for keeping track of how much fluid comes out of each drain on a daily basis. You will bring the recorded outputs on a data sheet with you at office visits. Ask us if you need a sheet to record your drain output on and we will get you one (often the hospital gives you one before you leave). Once the drain is removing less than 25-30 mL per day for several days in a row, it is safe to remove. There are exceptions to this rule. I've had drains come out in less than a week, and I've had drains stay in for a month. Anything between those two periods is completely normal. If your drain is no longer holding suction, call us. You likely will need to come in and let us work on it. The only thing worse than no drain when you need it, is a non-functioning drain.

Do not get discouraged if your drain output starts to increase. As you start feeling better and doing more, it is not uncommon for the drain output to increase at first. This is not a reason to do less or stay stagnant. Your drains will come out when they are ready and not a day later (or earlier). Remember, if the drain is pulling fluid away from your body, that's a good thing.

Medications

You will likely be given prescriptions for pain medicine, a stool softener to help with opioid induced constipation (OIC), and an antibiotic. Please take these medications as they are prescribed and call with any questions or concerns. Every medicine has alternatives and you may have reactions or side effects that we can address by changing your medication. No one should follow-up and say that they have been nauseated or had to take Benadryl

for the past week because a medication was causing them problems. Let us know so we can help. Some pain meds are very upsetting to your stomach or can cause constipation. The stool softener helps prevent the constipation and needs to be taken while you are using pain medications. They are not laxatives, they just make things move along better. They can also be purchased over the counter at any pharmacy or grocery store. It's also very important to stay well-hydrated during your recovery so drink plenty of water!

Activity

You probably won't feel like doing too much in the beginning. Maximum swelling is typically at 48-72 hours after surgery. It's at this point that some people state they feel like they have "hit a wall". Listen to your body. If you are tired – rest. If you are hungry – eat. If you are in pain – stop whatever you are doing that is causing you pain or take pain medication. I will slowly start to increase your activity level at each clinic appointment. Just because you are feeling great, doesn't mean it's okay for you to go to the gym or go for a run. Be upfront about what activities you would like to do and we'll see if they are appropriate for where you are in the healing process.

That being said, you need to get up and do things. Just lying around and doing nothing is just as bad as doing too much. Moving around and walking helps circulate your blood. This helps healing, but more importantly can help prevent blood clots from forming in your legs (deep venous thrombosis or DVT) which can be fatal. Once you're home, I encourage you to get up and go get yourself that glass of water you want, you go make your sandwich, you go walk to the mail box. Start doing little things that get you up and moving and back to your normal life. There is a happy median between doing too much and doing too little. If you're unsure, just ask. And remember, no one is to drive or operate heavy machinery while still taking narcotic pain medications. I will let you know when it's safe for you to drive again.

Nipple Reconstruction And Tattooing

Some women need to have their nipple-areolar complex removed with surgery for various reasons. If that's the case, we have several different methods of reconstructing the appearance of the nipple down the road. Now this won't be a functioning nipple, but it will certainly look like one. To me, the most important component of nipple reconstruction is in the tattooing. Just Google "3-dimensional nipple areolar tattooing" and prepare to be amazed. Tattoo artist can now give the appearance of a nipple that projects off the breast without any formal nipple reconstruction. I'm blown away by the results and have a tattoo artist here in Charlotte that I work with to provide incredibly realistic results. We will typically have you wait at least 6 months after surgery to start tattooing so any incision has had time to heal. My tattoo artist is a professional tattoo artist and does not take payments from insurance companies. It is an out-of-pocket expense but well worth it in my opinion.



Garrett Harper, MD • Evon Zoog, MD

Other Reasons To Call Immediately

Unfortunately, problems can occur. While we do everything we can to try and prevent them, nothing we ever do has a 100% guarantee of not having any hiccups along the way. Call us if you have a fever, if your surgical sites change in size or color, or if anything scares you. You are not bothering us – we do this job because we love it and our patients and want the best possible outcome and results for them.

Summary

You're here – you've started the journey. There will be days you feel great and others you don't – just like life. It's not easy, but it will all be worth it. We are here to help in any way that we can. Take comfort in knowing that each day that passes means you are a day closer to the new and improved you.

If you are years out from cancer surgery and have decided you are ready to look better and feel better, that's awesome. If you have been worried because breast cancer is prevalent in your family or you carry a gene that increases the chances you could get breast cancer, take a deep breath. If you have been diagnosed with breast cancer and are scared, focus on this – you are about to be able to yell from the mountain tops that you are now cancer-free. In either scenario, you've decided to take control and that should be very empowering. Please know that we are on your side and will be encouraging and cheering you on throughout this whole process. It's a marathon, not a sprint, so pace yourself. We at Graper Harper Cosmetic Surgery are honored to be with you on this journey.

Respectfully,

J. Garrett Harper, MD
Graper Harper Cosmetic Surgery
2915 Coltsgate Road
Suite 103
Charlotte, NC 28211
704.375.7111 (t)
704.375.0444 (f)