

Home Care after Latissimus Flap Surgery

You have had latissimus flap surgery to reconstruct your breast or breasts. Here is how to take care of yourself after you go home.

This factsheet will help you know if you need to call your doctor or care team. It has information about controlling pain and caring for the surgery cut (incision) and drains. It will also help you know when to restart your usual activities and medicines.

When to call for help

Tell your care team right away if you have:

General

- Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher
- Nausea and vomiting
- Pain not helped by pain medicine

Wound

- Redness, swelling, or warmth around the incision
- Incision reopens or seems not to be healing
- Skin changes color or temperature

Surgical drain

- Drain tube falls out
- Fluid leaks around the drain tube
- Pain around the tube gets worse

Drainage fluid

- Fluid changes color or becomes cloudy
- Fluid smells foul
- Fluid suddenly increases or decreases by more than 30 mL (about 2 tablespoons)

Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. – Call the plastic surgery nurse line at 801-213-8467 or contact your care team using MyChart.

After hours, weekends, and holidays – Call 801-581-2121 and ask for the plastic surgery resident on call.

If you have chest pain, trouble breathing, or other emergency concerns, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room.

Managing pain

Controlling your pain after surgery will help you recover. Talk with your care team if your pain is severe or the medicines you take are not working.

Your doctor gave you a prescription for pain medicine. Please follow the instructions for taking it. Be sure to take the pain medicine with food to prevent nausea.

The pain medicine your doctor prescribed is a narcotic. Do not drink alcohol or drive until you have stopped taking narcotic pain medicine for at least 24 hours.

Do not take more than 3000 mg of acetaminophen (Tylenol®) in 24 hours. If you are taking Norco® or Percocet®, you should not take any other medicines with acetaminophen in them.

If your pain is mild 24 to 48 hours after surgery, you may take ibuprofen (Advil®) instead of narcotic pain medicines. Take ibuprofen with food. Do not take ibuprofen if you are taking celecoxib (Celebrex®).

If you have unused narcotic pain medicines, take them to your pharmacy for proper disposal.

Managing constipation

Narcotic pain medicines can cause you to have hard, dry stools. Doing these things can help ease constipation:

- Drinking more fluid than usual
- Eating high-fiber foods such as prunes and bran
- Getting out of bed for short walks

Talk with your care team if you have trouble with constipation. They can recommend medicines to help.

Preventing infection

Your doctor gave you a prescription for antibiotics to help prevent infection. Take all of these pills as directed. Let your care team know if you need a refill.

Controlling nausea

Your care team may have put a patch behind your ear to control nausea. Remove the patch after 72 hours. Be careful not to touch your eyes after touching the patch. Wash your hands right away.

If you have nausea after taking off the patch, try drinking soda or eating dry crackers to settle your stomach. If this does not help, call your care team. They can give you a different medicine to relieve nausea.

Taking your usual medicines

You may have stopped taking birth control, hormone replacement medicine, or tamoxifen before the surgery. Wait 1 week after the surgery before taking any of these medicines again.

If you stopped taking aspirin or blood-thinning medicines before the surgery, talk with your doctor about when to start these again.

You can take your other usual medicines as soon as you go home from the hospital.

Do not smoke or use products that have nicotine. Smoking slows your healing process.

Taking care of your incision

You will have a clear plastic (Tegaderm®) dressing over your surgery drain. Leave this in place until your follow-up visit. Contact your care team if the dressing becomes loose or leaky.

Your incision is covered with surgical glue. The glue will dissolve as you heal, usually in about 2–3 weeks.

Do not use cold packs, ice packs, or heating pads on your incision. These can cause complications.

Do not put pressure on the surgery incision or breast reconstruction. Pressure slows down blood flow and makes it harder for you to heal.

You may shower 48 hours after surgery. Gently pat the surgical area dry afterward. Do not take baths, swim, or soak in a hot tub until your doctor says it is okay.

Wear the surgical bra that you were given day and night for 3 weeks, except when you wash it or shower. If the bra is too tight or hurts, talk to your doctor. Ask your doctor about when you can wear a regular bra again.

Wear loose clothing. Shirts that open in the front are usually easier to put on and take off.

Taking care of your surgical drain

Surgical drains remove fluid from your incision to help prevent swelling and lower the risk of infection. After surgery, you can expect to see bloody fluid that turns lighter in color and reduces in volume each day.

The Jackson-Pratt® (JP) drain is a soft plastic tube attached to a plastic bulb. This drain is held to the skin with a small stitch so it does not fall out.

Your care team will show you how to care for your drain before you leave the hospital. You can watch a video about drain care here: bitly.com/surgicaldrain.

You can find written instructions for drain care in the *Surgical Drain Care* factsheet.

Do not drive or do housework until the drain is out. Your doctor will remove it when it is no longer needed.

Eating and drinking

You can eat anything you want after the surgery. For the first few days, it is best to eat light meals.

The surgical team put a tube down your throat during the operation. You may have a sore throat for a few days. Choose foods that are easy to swallow until your throat feels better.

Drink 8 to 10 glasses of water and other caffeine-free beverages every day to stay hydrated. Avoid alcohol until your doctor tells you it is okay. Alcohol can slow your healing process.

Rest, activities, and exercise

Get lots of rest. Take it easy and do not do anything that takes a lot of effort for at least 8 weeks after surgery. Limit activities to what is comfortable for you.

Avoid pushing, pulling, reaching, or any activity that moves your arms repeatedly. Do not try to lift anything that weighs more than a gallon of milk.

Sleep on your back. Do not lie completely flat. Use pillows to support your upper body and arms.

Starting the day after surgery, take several short and easy walks every day. This will help you recover more quickly. If you climb stairs, take them slowly.

Talk to your doctor about when to start stretching and lifting your arms above shoulder level. You must be able to do your normal activities without pain before you start actively exercising or working out.

You can have sex that does not take a lot of effort when your body feels ready for it. Avoid any pressure on your breasts. Wait longer before trying positions where your arms support weight.

Do not drive until you have stopped taking prescription pain medicine for at least 24 hours. You must also be able to move your arms without pain for safe driving.

Talk with your doctor about when it is safe for you to return to work. Most people can gradually return to normal daily activities after 6 to 8 weeks.

Possible side effects

Appearance – It is normal for your reconstructed breast to look different from your natural breast. It may sit higher up on your chest or be a different size than your natural breast. The surgery causes temporary swelling, which can also change how the breast looks. Wait until your body recovers, then talk to your plastic surgeon if you have concerns about how your breasts look.

Crusting – You can use an antibiotic skin ointment to help keep the surgery cuts flexible.

Itching – Your incision may itch, and you may sometimes feel small shooting sensations as you recover. This is a sign that your nerves are healing.

Numbness – Surgery cuts some nerves in the skin. For many patients, sensation gradually returns as the nerves heal 2 to 3 months after the surgery. Some numbness may be permanent.

Scarring – New scars are red, dark pink, or purple. The color will lighten over time. It may take a year or longer. Sunlight can darken scar tissue. Keep your scars covered when you are out in the sun.

Swelling and bruising – Some swelling and bruising is normal after surgery. If the swelling or bruising gets worse, call your care team right away.

Follow-up care

You will have weekly clinic visits with your care team for at least 3 weeks after the surgery. It is very important to come to all your follow-up appointments.