Breast reconstruction after risk-reducing surgery

This information is from the booklet Understanding risk-reducing breast surgery. You may find the full booklet helpful. We can send you a free copy – see page 5.

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What is breast reconstruction?

Breast reconstruction is surgery to create new breast shapes after an operation to remove a breast (mastectomy). Most women having risk-reducing breast surgery choose to have breast reconstruction, but some women prefer not to. Risk-reducing breast surgery is an operation to remove healthy breasts to greatly reduce the risk of a breast cancer developing.

If you choose not to have reconstruction, your breast care nurse can tell you about breast forms and bras you can wear after surgery. Breast Cancer Care also produces some helpful booklets. Visit breastcancercare.org.uk

Breast reconstruction does not increase the chance of a cancer developing. And it won’t hide a cancer.

Breast reconstruction can be done at the same time as risk-reducing breast surgery (immediate reconstruction), or sometime later (delayed reconstruction). Most women have immediate reconstruction. This leaves fewer scars and a better appearance for the breasts. You can talk to your breast surgeon about the advantages and disadvantages of immediate and delayed reconstruction before you decide what’s best for you.
Breast reconstruction after risk-reducing surgery

The aim of breast reconstruction is to make breast shapes that look and feel as natural as possible. But it’s important to have realistic expectations. It’s difficult to know how you will feel about your reconstructed breasts. Some women are not happy with them. Reconstructed breasts won’t look or feel exactly the same as your natural breasts. And they will be less sensitive or they may feel numb.

Talking with your surgeon

Breast reconstruction is done by an oncoplastic surgeon or a plastic surgeon. Oncoplastic surgeons are trained in both breast cancer surgery and breast reconstruction. More complex types of breast reconstruction operations are usually done by plastic surgeons.

In some hospitals, two surgeons may work together. A breast surgeon carries out the mastectomies. Then, a plastic surgeon makes the new breast shapes.

New breast shapes can be made:
• with breast implants
• by using tissue taken from another part of your body
• with a combination of implants and tissue taken from another part of your body.

Your surgeon will advise you on the types of reconstruction that are most suitable for you. They will show you photos of women who have had breast reconstruction. There are also photos in Understanding risk-reducing breast surgery of women who have had different types of breast reconstruction.

You will usually have a choice of more than one type of reconstruction. What is most suitable for you will depend on your:
• general health
• body build
• personal preferences.
It’s fine to ask your surgeon lots of questions and ask to see photos of their previous work. They are used to this, and it could help you make the decision that feels right for you. Your breast surgeon and your reconstructive surgeon will be sensitive to your thoughts and feelings about reconstruction.

‘I was shown realistic photos of women at my appointment. There was a scrapbook of “before and after” photos with each type of reconstruction. It had the negative points, such as the scarring, for each. It was very helpful.’

Chris

Some questions to ask your surgeon

It can often help to make a list of questions to ask your breast reconstructive surgeon. Here are some questions you might like to ask:

• What experience do you have in this type of surgery and how many of these operations do you do each year?
• Will you be doing the operation yourself?
• Do I need to lose my nipple, and what are my options for nipple reconstruction?
• What types of reconstruction would be suitable for me?
• Should I see a plastic surgeon?
• What are the risks or complications of the different types of surgery, and what are the chances of them happening?
• How long will the operation take?
• How long will I be in hospital?
• What can I expect my reconstructed breast to look and feel like:
  • immediately after surgery
  • six months after surgery
  • a year after surgery?
• Where will my scars be and what will they look like?
• Are there any ‘before and after’ pictures I can see?
• How long will it take before I can go back to everyday activities?
• How long will I have to wait before I could have the surgery?

You may find the answers to some of these questions in our booklet Understanding risk-reducing breast surgery, but you should still check them with your surgeon, as there may be slight differences.

‘I went to see the plastic surgeon twice, because I couldn’t make a decision the first time.’

Roxanne

Types of breast reconstruction

There are three main types of breast reconstruction:

Reconstruction using breast implants

Implants are placed under the skin and muscle that covers your chest to create new breast shapes.

Reconstruction using your own tissue

Skin, fat and sometimes muscle are taken from another part of your body to make new breast shapes.

Reconstruction using implants and your own tissue

Breast shapes are made using implants and skin, fat and sometimes muscle taken from another part of your body.

We have more information on the types of breast reconstruction in our booklet Understanding risk-reducing breast surgery.
More information and support

More than one in three of us will get cancer. For most of us it will be the toughest fight we ever face. And the feelings of isolation and loneliness that so many people experience make it even harder. But you don’t have to go through it alone. The Macmillan team is with you every step of the way.

To order a copy of Understanding risk-reducing breast surgery or any other cancer information, visit be.macmillan.org.uk or call 0808 808 00 00.

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