

Recovering after an LD (Latissimus Dorsi) breast reconstruction

Following your recent breast surgery, when you leave the hospital you should try to rest, however daily gentle exercise (walking) is important and will reduce your chance of developing a Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT).

You should continue to wear your supportive stockings until your mobility is the same as it was prior to your admission. Ease yourself gently back into your daily routine as you feel able. You must remember that you have had major surgery and that your body is still recovering from the effects of the anaesthetic as well as the surgery.

When you leave hospital, it is important that you continue with the exercises given by the physiotherapist for the recommended period of time. The exercises will help to prevent shoulder stiffness, encourage blood flow, improve tightness and reduce the risk of lymphoedema.

In the early days following your operation, your body will need a vast amount of 'internal' energy to repair itself. This leaves you with small amounts of energy for the rest of the day. After each activity you carry out, you may find your energy levels dipping and you may need a rest while your body recovers. As the days and weeks pass, your energy store will increase so that after 6 to 12 weeks you will have returned to your normal daily pattern. During this time, you may find you have a good day when you appear to have lots of energy. This may be followed by a couple of days when you feel tired and sometimes tearful - this is normal.

Exercise and physical activity

You may resume gentle exercise six weeks after your surgery as long as the wounds have healed fully and your surgeon has agreed. Until then you should avoid anything that causes you to strain.

In some cases, you may develop weakness in your shoulder, back or arm. This is caused by the muscle being moved from the back to the chest. You might experience a partial loss in function or strength, making it difficult to lift and turn. This can affect your ability to participate in sports, including swimming, tennis and weight training. If you have muscle weakness that is problematic and persistent, a referral can be made to our physiotherapy department.

There are no restrictions to having sexual intercourse from a medical point of view. Coping with breast cancer and its treatment can be physically and psychologically demanding, and you may well feel tired. You may not feel any desire for sex for a while – this is normal.



In addition:

- We advise not to drive initially after your surgery, but please ask for further advice at your first outpatient appointment
- We advise you not to smoke after your operation as smoking will increase the risk of complications
- You should not return to work until your plastic surgeon advises you to. This could be up to eight weeks depending on the nature of your work.

Looking after your wounds

Your wound has been closed with dissolving stitches. These will take several weeks to dissolve. You may be aware of the threads at each end of the wound – these will be trimmed at your outpatients' appointment.

You will have some micropore paper tape covering the wounds. Shower daily and dry the tape with a cool hairdryer or by patting it dry. This tape can then be left in place until you attend your outpatient dressings appointment, unless it becomes soiled or loose.

In some cases, women are required to be discharged with their drains following an LD reconstruction. Your discharging nurse will go through how to measure your drain and advise you on how to make contact when it needs removing.

You will have scars to your chest and back from the operation, but the appearance will improve within a few months of surgery. They may be more noticeable, even red and lumpy temporarily, before they start to fade. Protect scars from sunlight or any ultraviolet (UV) light until they have completely faded by applying a total sun block to the affected area when exposed. Your outpatients nurse will explain how best to minimise scarring at your follow up appointment. Scars usually become fully mature and fade 12-18 months after an operation.

After surgery, the team will assist you in putting on your sports bra. This should be worn day and night for four to six weeks. Underwired bras will irritate the scars and should be avoided at this time. Once your wounds are fully healed, you will be able to be measured for a properly fitting bra. There is no research evidence suggesting you should not use deodorant, but due to the change in sensation, you might find it difficult to apply.

You should completely avoid using hot water bottles or heat pads on your full breast, both during the healing stage and once the skin has healed. The skin may look normal, however there may be altered sensation in the area which can result in significant burns.

To help your wounds to heal we advise the following:

- Sleep on your back, propped up with a couple of pillows for at least two weeks, as this eases any stress or tension on the wounds and helps the new breast to settle
- Ensure you have a varied diet with adequate vitamins and minerals which are needed for wound healing
- Avoid heavy lifting or repetitive moments
- Avoid smoking after your operation as this will increase the risk of complications occurring.



Possible problems following surgery

Seroma

Following surgery the body produces excess fluid (serous fluid). Wound drains can help remove some of this excess fluid. With LD flaps it is common for women to experience seromas to the donor site; therefore your surgeon may choose to keep the drain longer than usual. Seromas are not a serious problem and will reduce with time. Dealing with a seroma is never an emergency. Generally nothing needs to be done unless you are particularly uncomfortable - inform your nurse if this happens.

Wound infection (rare occurrence)

This can happen after any operation. Usually the wound becomes red, hot and painful. You may feel generally unwell and have a raised body temperature. Call us, as you may need a review or a prescription for antibiotics.

Bruising (very common)

Bruising is very common after breast surgery as the breast has a very good blood supply. Bruising may appear some days after the surgery. Generally nothing needs to be done as it improves with time over a period of a few weeks.

Haematoma (rare occurrence)

A haematoma is a collection of blood around the wound area. It is caused by bleeding from a small blood vessel within the wound. If this happens, it will usually be within 24 hours of surgery, although occasionally it can happen 10 to 14 days later. A haematoma can be quite firm to touch and blood may ooze from the wound. If this happens, you may need to return to theatre to have the collection of blood removed.

Pain (common)

There is usually discomfort rather than pain. Simple pain relief tablets or anti-inflammatory tablets (if these are suitable for you) taken on a regular basis should be sufficient. Pain management is much easier if treated earlier rather than later.

Change in sensation and numbness (common)

During surgery, some of the nerves may be cut or bruised. You may become aware of numbness, loss of sensation or heightened sensation around the operation site, at the side of your chest, back or the inner aspect of your arm. This is quite normal and usually improves with time.

Things to look out for

- Signs of redness and feeling generally unwell with fever
- Odour coming from the wounds
- A burning sensation around the wounds
- Increased pain and swelling or bleeding at the site of the operation
- Leaking from the wounds which might be odorous, green / yellow (pus).



Contact details

The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline:

020 8915 6899

(Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week)

Please contact your Specialist Nurse if any problems occur or if you would like further advice.

Clinical Nurse Specialist, Plastic Surgery

020 7811 8318 (NHS)

020 352 8171 Ext. 1573 (Private care)

Breast Care Nurses, Sutton

020 8661 3027 (NHS)

Breast Care Nurses, Chelsea

0207 808 2813 (NHS)

