

## Recovering after Transverse Upper Gracilis flap (TUG) breast reconstruction

When you are discharged from 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. Gently ease yourself 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.

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 may need a rest while your body recovers. As the days and weeks pass, your energy store will increase so that after six 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.

You may start gentle exercise, in addition to walking, six weeks after your surgery, as long as the wound has healed fully and you have been seen by your surgeon. Until then you should avoid anything that causes you to strain. There are no restrictions to intimacy and sex 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.

In addition:

- We advise **not** to drive initially after your surgery, but please ask 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.
- **You should completely avoid using hot water bottles or heat pads on your full breast or inner thighs 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.**



## Looking after your wounds

Your wounds have been closed with dissolving stitches - these take several weeks to dissolve. You may be aware of the threads at each end of the wound and these will be trimmed at your outpatient appointment. The tape dressings which will be on your wounds when you go home will stay there until your outpatient appointment. You may shower over these and pat them dry or dry the tape using a hairdryer on a cool setting.

Your scars will improve within a few months of surgery. They may be a little lighter or darker (depending on your skin tone) and noticeable, even red and lumpy temporarily, before they start to fade. Scars may stay lighter or darker for up to nine months before they fade. Scars usually become fully mature and fade 12-18 months after an operation. The use of other scar treatments, such as silicone tape, can be discussed with your plastic surgery team.

Protect scars from sunlight or any ultraviolet (UV) light until they have completely faded by applying a total sun block (SPF 50) to the affected area when exposed. Your outpatients nurse will explain how best to minimise scarring at your follow up appointment.

You will be wearing a sports bra before you leave the hospital. This should be worn day and night for four weeks. Underwired bras should be avoided at this time. After four to six weeks, if your wounds are completely healed, you may be measured for a properly fitting bra. To help your wounds heal, we advise the following:

- Sleep on your back for two weeks as this relieves any stress or tension on the wounds. We suggest that you are propped up in bed with a couple of pillows for two weeks to prevent further swelling. If you are doing this, remember to move your legs and ankles regularly to reduce your chance of getting a deep vein thrombosis (DVT).
- Ensure that you are having a varied diet with adequate vitamins and minerals which are needed for wound healing.
- Avoid bending or lifting heavy objects for about six weeks after surgery to allow your wounds to fully heal.

## Care of your thighs

- We advise you to wear compression pants that fit to the knee for eight weeks after surgery as this helps to support your leg where the muscle has been taken.
- We encourage gentle walking but avoid leg and lower body exercise for six weeks.
- Massaging the upper part of your thigh may help to reduce discomfort. A tepid hot water bottle may also be soothing but be very careful not to burn your skin as the sensation in your thigh may be reduced.

After surgery, the body produces excess fluid (serous fluid). Wound drains can help remove some of this excess fluid. When the drain is removed, the fluid may still form and produce a swelling around the wound. This swelling is known as a seroma - it is not a problem and will reduce with time. Occasionally, the body can produce a large amount of fluid which can make the leg quite swollen. Dealing with a seroma is never an emergency. Generally nothing needs to be done unless you are particularly uncomfortable - tell your nurse if this happens. The area around your scar is expected to be swollen and bruised - the swelling may take up to six months to go down.



## Possible problems following surgery

### 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 if this happens, 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, usually 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. Surgery to the armpit can be more uncomfortable than the breast itself. 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 or the inner aspect of your arm. This is quite normal and usually improves with time.

### Symptoms to look out for

- Feeling generally unwell
- Fever
- Burning sensation around the wounds
- Bleeding from the wound
- Increased swelling, redness, or fluid leakage from the wound
- Increased pain from the thigh or breast.

Please call your specialist nurse if any of these symptoms occur.

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 your work.



## Contact details

If you have any concerns, please contact:

**The Royal Marsden Macmillan Hotline:** 020 8915 6899

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

Please contact your Clinical Nurse Specialist if you would like further advice:

<b>Chelsea</b>	020 7811 8318	(NHS)
	0207 352 8171 Ex. 1573	(Private)
<b>Sutton</b>	0207 352 8171 Ex. 4345	(NHS & Private)

