

# Breast Reconstruction Using Tissue Expanders and Implants

**This booklet will give you information about:**

- Breast reconstruction using tissue expanders and implants
- Care after surgery
- Who to call with questions for psychosocial support



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# What should I know about Breast Reconstruction Using Tissue Expanders and Implants?

Tissue expanders and implants are used to reconstruct the breast after mastectomy. This type of breast reconstruction is done in two surgeries:

1. Insertion of a tissue expander.
2. Exchange of the tissue expander for a permanent implant.

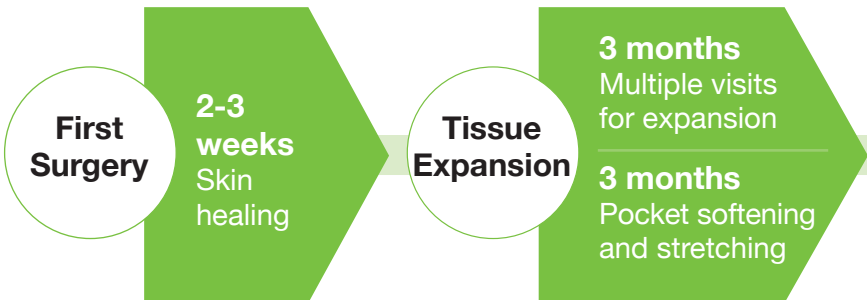
## What is a tissue expander and how does it work?

A tissue expander is an inflatable device made out of a silicone shell with a built-in metal port. The expander is placed under the breast skin and chest muscle to make the pocket for the final breast implant.

Next, the tissue expander is inflated over a period of months little by little with saline (salt water). This process is called **tissue expansion**.

Once the pocket is stretched, it needs time to settle and relax. Then the tissue expander is ready to be changed for a permanent implant.

Approximate Timeline:



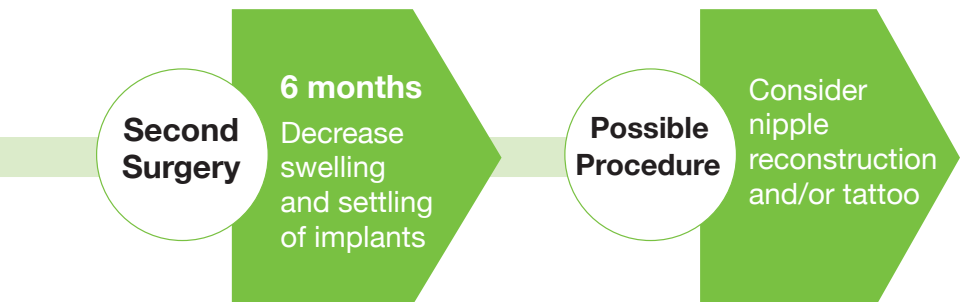
## How long will it take to complete this process?

There is usually at least 6 months from the time of tissue expander insertion to implant exchange surgery. A resting period between the two surgeries is necessary for your stretched breast skin and muscle to relax and soften. The length of time may also be affected by:

- Your rate of healing.
- How tight your tissues are.
- Whether there are any complications.
- Whether you need radiation.
- The volume of saline needed to fill the tissue expander.
- The availability of operating room time.

## What happens after all the steps are complete?

- Nipple reconstruction can be done 6 months or more after implant exchange surgery.
- Tattooing can be done at least 3 months after nipple reconstruction.
- Some women choose not to have nipple reconstruction and/or tattooing.
- If your skin is very thin or has taken a long time to heal, it may not be possible to have nipple reconstruction.



## **How will the implant look and feel after I have healed?**

- Your permanent implant will feel firmer to the touch than a natural breast.
- Your reconstructed breast will not fill out the front of a formed bra.
- Your reconstructed breast will have no feeling.
- A reconstructed breast with an implant will not age like a natural breast and will not move, or “droop” like a natural breast.
- You may experience cold sensitivity.

## **Will I need to have the implants replaced?**

You should follow up every year with your plastic surgeon.

If you notice any changes in shape, position, firmness, pain, sudden swelling, or asymmetry of your breasts, contact your plastic surgeon. In those situations, you may need surgery.

## **What should I know about Tissue Expander Insertion?**

Placement of the tissue expander is a surgery done in the operating room while you are asleep. There may be a small amount of saline placed in the tissue expander at the time of the insertion.

If you have already had a mastectomy, the incision is usually made through the mastectomy scar. This surgery takes about 1.5 hours if one breast is being reconstructed, or 2 hours if both breasts are being reconstructed. You will go home the same day.

If you are having immediate breast reconstruction (tissue expander insertion at the same time as mastectomy), the whole surgery takes about 3 hours if one breast is being reconstructed, and 4 hours if both breasts are being reconstructed. You will go home the next day.

On the day of surgery, bring loose-fitting comfortable clothing and supportive slip-on shoes to wear home (shirts with buttons/zippers in the front are easier to put on after surgery).

When you are sent home from surgery, you will be given a card to carry in your wallet that says you have a tissue expander. If you are going through airport security, you may need to show this card because of the metal port attached to the tissue expander. You **cannot** have an MRI while you have the tissue expander inside of you.

See the section titled “Care After Surgery” on page 10 for detailed information on what to expect after surgery.

## What should I know about Tissue Expansion?

### What will happen to me during tissue expansion?

The first tissue expansion will be done in the clinic by the nurse or a member of the plastic surgery team once your incision has adequately healed; this is usually 2 weeks after tissue expander insertion.

The metal port (about the size of a Loonie) is the area of the tissue expander that the needle is put to inject saline; it is under your skin and will feel harder than the rest of the expander.

Saline fluid will be inserted into the tissue expander at each clinic visit - the amount will depend on your level of comfort and how tight your tissues are.



This is what the expander looks like. It is completely covered by your skin. The needle and tubing are placed through your skin in clinic, to inflate the expander, but are not there all the time.

## **At each clinic visit for tissue expansion:**

- A magnet will be used to locate the port under the breast skin.
- Its location will be marked with a marker.
- The skin will be cleaned with alcohol.
- A small needle will be used to add fluid to the expander through the port.
- A small bandage will be placed on the skin.
- You may remove the bandage that evening.

## **What will tissue expansion feel like?**

- Most of the skin following mastectomy is numb and has very little feeling.
- You may feel a small twinge of discomfort as the needle goes through the muscle to reach the port.
- You may feel fullness or stretching as the tissue expander is filled.
- Expansion will be done to match the size of the tissue expander.

For 1-2 days after an expansion, you may feel tightness in the area. This discomfort goes away as the pocket stretches. You may take Tylenol if the discomfort bothers you.

## **How often will I visit the clinic for tissue expansion?**

- Several clinic visits, usually 2-3 weeks apart are needed.
- There is no harm in waiting a bit longer between clinic visits.

After your final expansion, a separate appointment will be booked with your surgeon to plan your exchange surgery.



## **How will I look with tissue expanders?**

During tissue expansion, you will initially be flatter/smaller than your natural breast(s). The expander will feel firmer than the implant will. The shape of the tissue expander is often quite different than the shape of the final implant.

It is normal to:

- Have puckered skin.
- Be able to feel the outer edge of the tissue expander through your skin.
- Feel a harder area in front, which is the port.
- Feel some muscle tightness.

## **What should I know about the Exchange of the Tissue Expander for a Permanent Implant?**

- Surgery is done in the operating room.
- You will be asleep and feel no pain during the procedure.
- Surgery takes about 2 hours.
- You will go home the same day.
- The existing scar is usually used for the incision, or an incision at the fold under the breast may be recommended.
- You will need to bring a soft cup bra (no underwire) with you to the operating room, as it will be put on you at the end of the operation. Your surgery team will tell you where to purchase this bra.

## **What size will I be?**

Usually a breast implant reconstruction can make a B cup, or possibly, a C cup size. However, there is no guarantee of a certain bra size. The size (volume) of the expander and implant is mostly guided by the existing width of your chest wall. You cannot expect to look the same as someone who has had implants for cosmetic breast enlargement.

## Other things your surgeon may have discussed with you:

### **Acellular Dermal Matrix (ADM)**

- This is donated tissue (skin) that has been processed to remove cells to create a tissue matrix.
- It is placed under your own skin at the time of surgery to help support the tissue expander or implant. You will not be able to see it.

### **Direct-to-Implant Reconstruction**

- Sometimes, the final implant can be placed at the time of the mastectomy.
- Not everyone can have this surgery. Your surgeon would have told you if this is possible for you.
- Even if this is a possible plan for you, it may be decided during the surgery that a tissue expander is needed instead as a safer option.

## Care After Surgery

This section will tell you what you need to know for the postoperative period after tissue expander insertion and implant exchange surgeries.

### **Hospital Stay**

You may have to stay for one night in the hospital if tissue expander insertion is done at the same time as mastectomy. For delayed tissue expander insertion (not at the same time as mastectomy), you should be able to go home the same day.

For implant exchange surgery, usually patients can go home on the same day.

## Dressing

After tissue expander insertion surgery and implant exchange surgery, a clear tape will cover your incision(s). Do **NOT** remove this dressing. Your surgeon will remove the tape when you have healed, usually after 2 weeks.

## Medication

Pain medication will be prescribed after both tissue expander insertion surgery and implant exchange surgery.

Do NOT use cold or heating pads on your reconstructed breasts. Your sensation is altered from the surgery.

Antibiotics to prevent infection will be prescribed in all cases.

## Drains

You may wake up from surgery with drains that will stay in for 2-3 weeks.

Drains are put in to help prevent the buildup of fluid and blood at the operative site and held in place by a small suture that will be removed when the drain is removed.

You will stay on antibiotics until the day after the last drain is removed.



This is what a drain looks like. The white part is the part that is under your skin. The clear tube comes out from your skin. The bulb holds any fluid that comes out. The blue part is a clip to hold the bulb to your clothing.

## **Number of Drains**

If tissue expander insertion is done at the same time as mastectomy, you will have 2 drains per breast. If tissue expander insertion is done after a delay, you will have 1 drain per breast.

After implant exchange surgery, you will have 1 drain per breast if a shaped implant has been used. If a round implant has been placed, a drain may not be used.

Your drains will be numbered with tape so you can keep track of each drain's output.

## **Drain Care**

Community Nursing Care can be arranged to help you to care for your drains if needed.

A small piece of gauze will cover each drain site. This gauze only needs to be changed if it becomes wet. The Community nurse or the clinic nurse can do this for you.

Do NOT shower or wet the breast or drain area until all your drains have been removed. You may carefully sponge bath the rest of your body. You may shower 48 hours after the last drain is removed.

Follow these instructions for drain care at home:

1. Measure your drain output 2 times per day (12 hours apart) and record the amounts of fluid drained using the table included in this pamphlet. Record each drain's amount separately.
2. When drain output is less than 30 mL for two days in a row, the drain is ready to be removed. If ADM has been used, all drains need to stay in for at least 1 week and the output needs to be less than 20 mL for two days in a row before a drain can be removed.

Some drains may have to stay in longer than others, depending on how much fluid is being drained. The Community nurse or clinic nurse will remove the drains for you. A small bandage with Polysporin ointment will be placed over the opening where the drain was removed. The drain site will close in 1-2 days.

## **Activity Restrictions**

You need to sleep on your back for the first 6 weeks. After 6 weeks, most patients can resume normal activities.

### **After tissue expander insertion:**

- Do not lift over 5 lbs for 6 weeks.
- Do not lift the arm above shoulder level for 2 weeks.
- Do not drive for 2-3 weeks, or until you are off of all medications that cause drowsiness and you have normal ability to twist and turn to check blind spots.
- No strenuous activities (high impact aerobics, jogging, swimming) for 6 weeks.
- You will be given postoperative physiotherapy exercises.

### **After implant exchange surgery:**

- Do not lift your arm above shoulder level for 2 weeks.
- Do not drive for 2-3 weeks, or until you are off of all medications that cause drowsiness and you have normal ability to twist and turn to check blind spots.
- No strenuous activities (high impact aerobics, jogging, swimming) for 4 weeks.
- Avoid lifting anything over 5 pounds for 4 weeks.

**The length of time for activity restrictions may be different for each patient. Make sure that you are comfortable and ready before resuming your normal activities.**

## **Bras**

You do not need to wear a bra after tissue expander surgery, but for 6 weeks after implant exchange or direct-to-implant surgery, you must wear a soft-cup bra with no underwire. Make sure that when you exercise, you have a good quality sports bra. Bras are available for purchase at the Sunnybrook Ambulatory Patient Pharmacy, located near the M-1 hospital entrance.

## **Scar Management**

Scar management after implant exchange surgery is important for healing and the final appearance of your scar.

After incisions have healed completely and do not need to be covered with a dressing:

- Keep scars moist with Vaseline or vitamin E oil or cream.
- Massage firmly for 10 minutes in a circular motion twice a day.
- Protect your scar from the sun for at least 12 months.

If scars become raised, red and itchy, silicone gel sheeting may be prescribed.

## **Call your plastic surgeon if you have any of the following:**

- More or worsening pain.
- Swelling, redness or discharge.
- Temperature of 38°C (100.4°F) or higher for over 24 hours.
- Shortness of breath, chest pain, trouble breathing.

## **What if I need additional emotional support?**

If you need emotional support, call your surgeon's office and ask for a referral for support services. Your surgeon will refer you to a psychologist or social worker in the Odette Cancer Centre.

## **It's important to remember:**

- Do not use ice or heating pads on the any of the areas that have had surgery.
- Heat can cause burns on skin that does not have normal feeling.
- This includes sunbathing in a dark bathing suit.
- Avoid exercises that strengthen your chest muscles, such as plank or push-ups because these may cause shifting or rippling of the expander or implant.
- These precautions are permanent.

## Notes:

### Who do I contact with questions?

Louise Temerty Breast Centre Nursing Line: 416-480-5000

Plastic Surgeon's Office: 416-480-6069

### Who do I call after hours or on the weekend?

If you have questions or concerns after clinic hours, there is always a plastic surgery resident on call. Call Sunnybrook Locating at 416-480-4244 and ask for the plastic surgery resident on call. If you cannot reach the resident, go to your nearest emergency department.

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