

Body Image After Breast Cancer Surgery

Breast cancer treatment can include partial or full removal of one or both of your breasts, which can impact your self-image, emotions and relationship with others. This fact sheet will discuss:

- Breast removal surgeries and breast reconstruction
- Common emotions after surgery
- Changes to body image
- Intimacy and sexuality



Types of Breast Cancer Surgery

The treatment you receive for breast cancer could involve surgery to remove the cancer and then possible reconstructive surgery .

A **lumpectomy** is the removal of the cancer tumor from your breast. A **mastectomy** is the removal of the entire breast. These forms of surgery can leave scars and lasting changes in how you look.

A **breast reconstruction** rebuilds the shape of your breast through surgery. This can be done by using implants or tissue from your own body and sometimes using a prosthesis.

Breast reconstruction can help how you feel about yourself, such as the fit of clothing or retaining your throughout the day. Some who choose to remain flat utilize prostheses to give the appearance of breasts, and others opt not to use prostheses.



Your Emotional Well-Being

A wide range of emotions can follow breast cancer surgery, including feeling anxious, sad, worried, or depressed. You may feel that worries about body image after a life-threatening illness are not valid. But they are important and matter to your recovery.

Counseling and support groups can give perspective and help work through difficult emotions. They can help in making decisions, such as whether to undergo reconstruction. In the end, the decisions you make about your body are very personal and talking through these decisions can help you feel more comfortable making them.



Changes to Your Body Image

Changes to your body can impact your self-esteem. Will you feel attractive again? Will you ever feel like yourself again? These approaches can help you feel more like yourself again:

- **Be kind to yourself.** Give yourself the grace to accept changes to your body. Focus on the qualities that you like about yourself, such as your intelligence, your laugh or your kindness.
- **Try not to compare yourself to others.** Often, it is easy to compare ourselves to peers or to those in the media.
- **Reconnect with your body.** Focus on how you can move and connect with your body through yoga, dancing, going on a walk or bike-ride and many other activities.

Be open to your new self. It takes time to redefine how you feel about your body and how you feel



Intimacy and Relationships

Intimacy after breast surgery can be difficult. Scars and other changes can make you feel unattractive or 'not your best self.' You may notice a change in sex drive or worry about your partner's response to how your body has changed.

If you are in a relationship, try to be open about how you are feeling and your worries. Intimacy can take time. Try to find ways to reconnect as a couple through activities that you enjoyed to do together prior to the diagnosis.

If you are looking for new relationships, you may be anxious about how new partners will react to changes to your body. Take your time and disclose your diagnosis when you are ready. It can be helpful to practice what you want to share beforehand to yourself or to a trusted friend.

Be patient with yourself. Try not to rush into any form of intimacy until you are comfortable.

CancerCare® Can Help

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