

Tissue Expanders for Breast Reconstruction

What you need to know

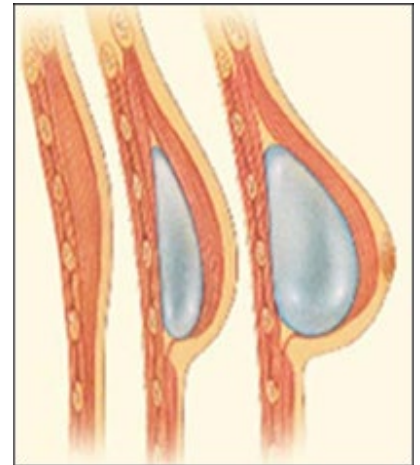
This handout explains how tissue expanders are used in breast reconstruction.

What are tissue expanders?

During surgery, a tissue expander is placed in the breast pocket either above or below your pectoral muscle. Tissue expanders are firm, implanted devices that your provider will gradually fill with saline over time. The purpose of the tissue expander is to stretch tissue (such as skin or muscle) to prepare for the next phase of reconstruction.

How does expansion work?

Expansion starts about 3 weeks after the expander is placed. You will come for clinic visits every 1 to 3 weeks for expansion. At these visits, your provider will use a needle to inject saline through a port in the expander. Over time, the pocket of skin and muscle will stretch to create your final breast size.



A tissue expander stretches the skin and/or muscle to create a pocket for the permanent breast implant or breast reconstruction.

What can I expect to feel after the expander is placed?

Each person's experience with tissue expanders is different. Some people have only mild discomfort, and others may have stronger pain. You will be given pain medicine after your tissue expanders are placed. Be sure to use this medicine as directed. Pain typically improves with time.

Your First Expansion

You will come to the clinic for your first follow-up visit about 3 weeks after the expander was placed. If you have healed, you may receive your first tissue expansion. Tissue expansions can be done either by your surgeon, physician assistant (PA), or nurse practitioner (ARNP).

This first visit usually lasts 60 minutes. It is normal to feel sore or tight in your chest for a few days after the expansion. Post-expansion discomfort will gradually improve.

Pain Control

- While you have the tissue expander, it is normal to feel tightness in your chest or chest muscle spasms. You may also feel discomfort in your back and ribs.
- Please do not place ice or heat on your mastectomy skin.
- Read the handout, “Pain Control After Reconstructive Surgery” to learn more about pain control.

Post-surgical Garment

- You may wear the post-mastectomy camisole or surgical bra if you were given one after surgery.
- Otherwise, do not wear any bra or compressive (tight) clothing for 4 weeks.

Incision Care

- Remove the outermost bandage 48 hours after surgery, before you shower for the first time. Generally, this bandage is gauze and tape.
- If your incision has strips of white tape (Steri-Strips) over it, leave the bandage in place until it falls off. If it does not fall off on its own, we will remove it during your first follow-up appointment.
- Check how your incision and the skin around your incision look when you remove the bandages. You may want to take a photo of the area. If you have concerns about how it looks as you heal, you can use this photo as your baseline “normal” to compare it with.

Hygiene

- Please take a shower 48 hours after surgery. We recommend daily showers after that to reduce the risk of infection.
- Use mild soap and wash very gently over your incisions.
- Do not take a bath, sit in a hot tub, or go swimming until your incisions are fully healed and no scabs remain. This may take 4 to 6 weeks.

Drains

- If you had drains placed at the time of surgery, we will teach you how to care for them. Please read the handout “Caring for Your JP Drains.”
- You will be on antibiotics until the last drain is removed.

Activities and Return to Work

- For 4 weeks, move your arms gently:
 - Do **not** raise your arm above shoulder height on your surgical side.
 - Do **not** lift, push, or pull anything that weighs more than 8 pounds (about the weight of a gallon of water). This includes children and pets.
 - Avoid repetitive arm movements such as chores (vacuuming, doing dishes, and laundry).
 - Avoid aerobic exercise (activities that cause heavy breathing or sustained elevated heart rate).
- We encourage walking because it is helpful for healing and rebuilding strength. Start with 3 to 4 walks a day for 5 to 10 minutes each. Gradually increase your distance and length of time as you heal.
- Returning to work varies from person to person and depends on the type of work you do. Please talk with your surgeon about what may be best for you.

Sleep Position

- Sleep on your back for 4 weeks after surgery, with your head slightly raised. After that, you may sleep on your side.
- It may be helpful to stack pillows, use a wedge pillow, or sleep in a recliner to keep your head raised.
- Do **not** sleep on your stomach for 3 months after surgery.

If you are experiencing new chest pain or shortness of breath, please call 911.

If you are experiencing redness, swelling, pain, cramping, or warmth usually in one limb, these may be signs of a blood clot. Please go to your nearest ER right away.

When to Contact Your Care Team:

Contact our clinic or your doctor if you have:

- Bleeding or drainage that soaks your dressing (hold pressure on the site to lessen bleeding)
- Opening at the edges of your incision
- A fever higher than 100.5°F (38°C)
- Shaking and/or chills
- Any signs of infection at your surgical site
 - Redness
 - Increased swelling
 - Bad-smelling drainage
 - Pus or cloudy colored drainage
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- New rash
- Pain that is worsening and is no longer eased by your pain medicine

Questions?

Your questions are important. Contact your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

During Clinic Hours

(Monday through Friday except holidays, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.):

If you have any questions or concerns, we recommend sending a message your surgeon through EPIC MyChart. Please include a photo if it would help explain your concern.

Or, you may call the Center for Reconstructive Surgery at 206.598.1217 option 2.

Urgent Needs Outside of Clinic Hours:

If you have an urgent care need after hours, on weekends, or holidays, please call 206.598.6190 and ask to speak to the plastic surgeon on call.