

Physiotherapy and plastic surgery

Improving nerve recovery and breast sensation after mastectomy with nerve reconstruction

Information for patients, family and carers

Introduction

This leaflet is designed to help you understand how to support the recovery of breast sensation after a mastectomy when the nerves are reconnected during the reconstruction. It explains how nerves work, how surgery may affect them, and what to expect during the healing process. You'll also find practical techniques and tips to help stimulate nerve recovery, improve comfort, and support your overall wellbeing during this time.

What are nerves?

Nerves are like tiny wires that carry messages between your brain and the rest of your body. They help you feel things like touch, pain and temperature

They also control how your muscles move.

How does mastectomy affect nerves?

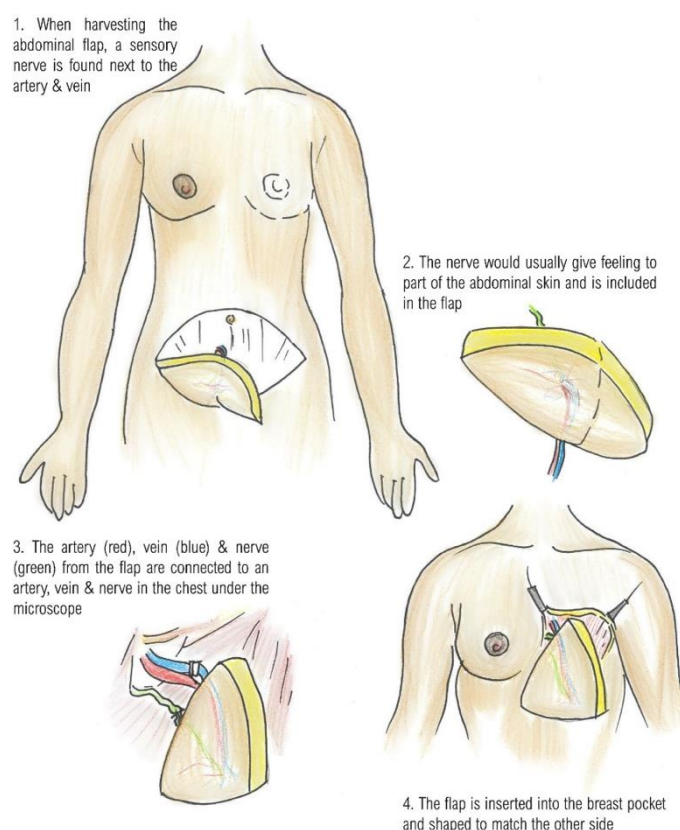
Mastectomy is an operation that removes breast tissue. Nerves that supply feeling to the breast are cut during the operation.

This often leads to numbness in that area. Sometimes, feeling may return on its own. But this is not guaranteed. You may have less sensation than you had before.

Sometimes your breast can be rebuilt using your own tissue.

This tissue is likely to come from your tummy (abdomen) or thigh. In this case, it might be possible to move a nerve with the tissue. This procedure is shown in the diagram (right).

This nerve is then connected to one in your chest.



This can:

- help your nerve recover
- improve sensation in the new breast

Nerve recovery takes time and varies from person to person. You may notice improvement in sensation between 6 to 24 months. In some cases, it can take up to 5 years (60 months).

What to expect while your nerve is recovering

The area of skin affected by your surgery may feel completely numb at first

After about six weeks you may then start to feel tingling and pins and needles. You may have a burning sensation. While this may be uncomfortable, it is a sign that your nerve is starting to recover.

How to help your sensory recovery

There is nothing we can do to speed up nerve healing. But there are things you can do to make the best of your sensory recovery. Your physiotherapist will go through some of these techniques with you. They'll guide you with exercises tailored to your needs.

You need to let your nerves adjust. It's best not to overwhelm them. So, when using these techniques, slowly increase:

- how often you do them
- how firm you are

Try to keep doing the techniques every day. This can help with the recovery of your nerve. So,

- aim to practice 3 times per day
- begin with short sessions of 1–2 minutes, and progressively increase the duration over time, aiming to reach up to 10 minutes as tolerance improves

Five techniques to try

1. Desensitisation

Tap or lightly stroke the skin with your fingers or a soft object. This helps to reduce hypersensitivity. It supports normal sensation.

2. Mirror therapy

Start to look at your reconstructed breast in the mirror. This helps your brain to recognise and accept the new breast as part of your body.

3. Touch

Start to touch your reconstructed breast. Once you can do this, you can start to use different materials and textures to touch your breast. Try cotton wool, a cloth or a small towel. This helps your brain learn to recognise different textures again.

4. Gentle massage

Lightly massage the area. This increases blood flow and encourages nerve healing.

Note: Do not massage this area if your surgical wounds are not healed.

5. Temperature therapy

Hold a compress, for example, a cloth or flannel, on the area for up to 20 minutes. Do this 3 times a day. You can use a compress that is warm or cool.

Be careful with the temperature of the compress. Do not make it too hot or too cold.

- a warm compress should be between 40 to 45°C.
You could get a burn injury if the compress is *above* this temperature.
- a cool compress should be 3 to 4°C.
You could get an ice burn if the compress is *below* this temperature

If you're having radiotherapy: wait at least 6 weeks after your last treatment before trying this

Your physiotherapist can advise you how to use the compress safely.

Other ways to support nerve recovery

Healthy Diet

Some nutrients support nerve health and repair. Eat foods rich in:

vitamin B12 fish, meat and dairy

vitamin D oily fish and fortified cereals, as well as safe sunlight exposure

omega-3 fatty acids oily fish, flaxseed and walnuts

Comfortable clothing

Avoid tight clothing over your chest area. This may put pressure on healing nerves and slow down recovery.

Support and advice

Macmillan Support Line offers confidential support to people living with cancer and their loved ones. It's open every day, 08:00 to 20:00

call: **0808 808 000**

visit www.macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan cancer information and support service at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust. This service offers free support and information to anyone affected by cancer. It's open Monday to Thursday (except bank holidays).

call **020 3313 5170**

email imperial.macmillansupportservice@nhs.net

Maggie's West London

Maggie's is everyone's home of cancer care. It gives emotional, practical, and social support to people with cancer and their family and friends. Maggie's West London is in the grounds of Charing Cross Hospital. (It is not part of the hospital). The centre is open Monday to Friday, 09.00 to 17.00.

call: **020 7386 1750**

visit: www.maggies.org/our-centres/maggies-west-london/

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**). The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries. They are often able to help solve problems for you.

call: **020 3313 0088**

email: imperial.pals@nhs.net

Or, if you need to **complain**, contact the Complaints department.

call: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

email: ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net

write: Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street, London W2 1NY

Alternative formats

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