

How is primary breast cancer treated?

Surgery



This information is for anyone who has primary breast cancer and wants to know more about how it is treated.

It is written by Breast Cancer Care, a charity that helps people who have breast cancer and other breast conditions.

You can also get Breast Cancer Care's longer free booklet **Treating primary breast cancer**.

What is in this information?



In this information there are answers to questions about different types of surgery to treat primary breast cancer. The questions are listed below. Click on them to go straight to that section.

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Surgery

What are the different types of breast cancer surgery?

There are two main types of breast cancer surgery.

1. Breast-conserving surgery

You might also hear this called a 'lumpectomy' or 'wide local excision'.

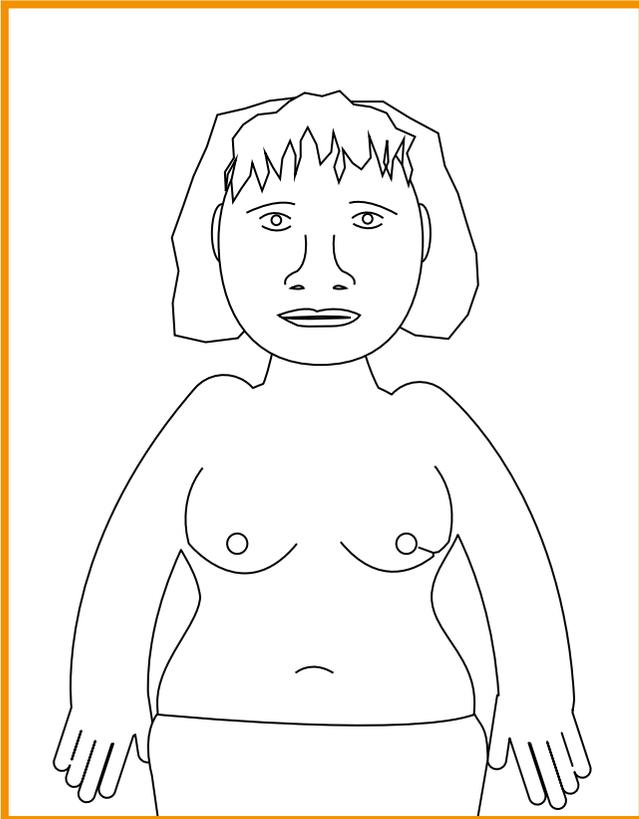
2. Mastectomy

3. Breast reconstruction

Most people also need lymph node surgery to take out and look at glands called lymph nodes. This is because breast cancer cells sometimes spread into the lymph nodes under your arm.

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What is breast-conserving surgery?



Breast-conserving surgery is when surgeons take out the cancer and an area of healthy breast from all around it.

The healthy part is called a margin or a border.

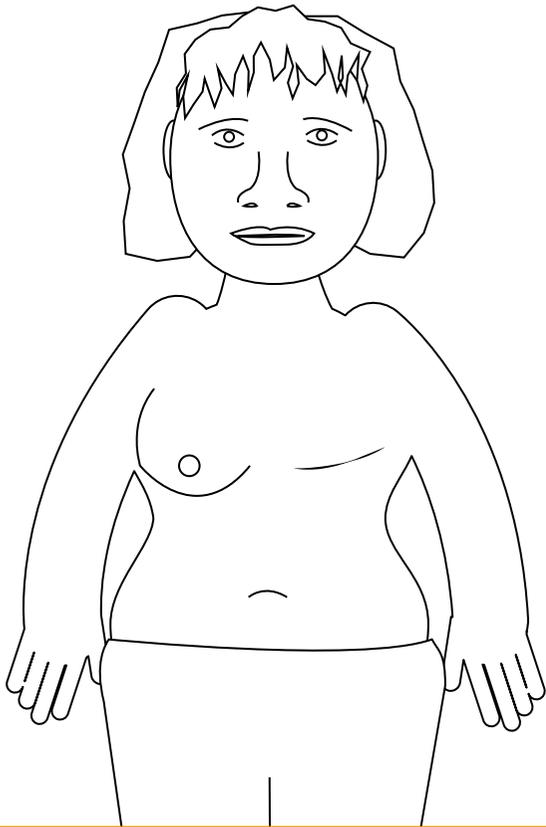
Breast-conserving surgery tries to keep as much of your breast as possible while taking out all the cancer.

Other names for breast-conserving surgery are:

- wide local excision
- lumpectomy

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What is a mastectomy?



A mastectomy is when all of your breast is taken away including the nipple area.

The treatment team usually suggests a mastectomy when:

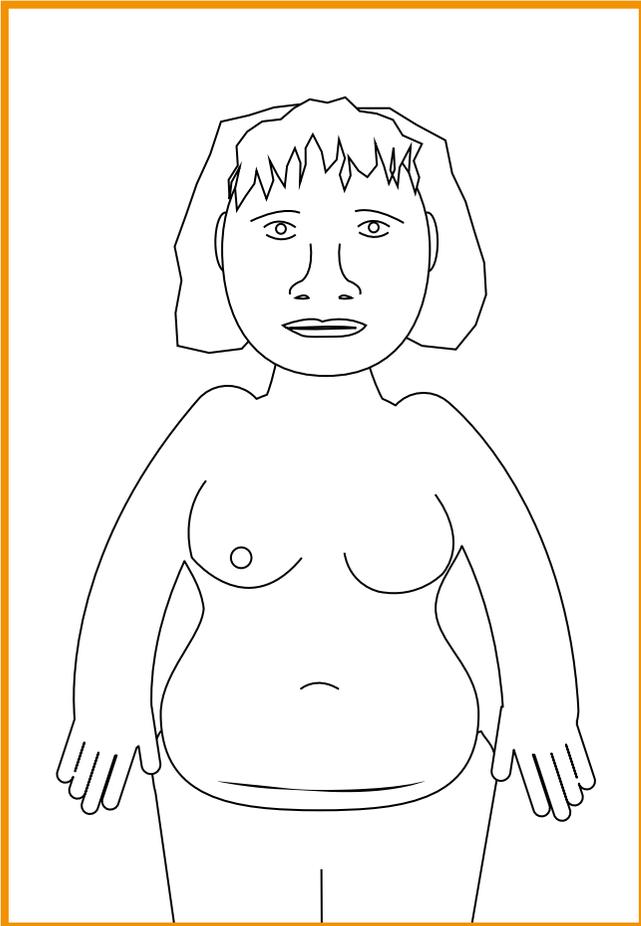
- the cancer takes up a large part of the breast
- there is more than one area of cancer in the breast

Some people ask for a mastectomy even when it has not been suggested by the treatment team.

If you are having a mastectomy, your surgeon will talk with you about choosing whether or not to have breast reconstruction surgery.

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What is breast reconstruction?



Breast reconstruction is an operation, or more than one operation, to make a new breast shape when you have had your mastectomy.

There are lots of different ways surgeons can do a breast reconstruction. There are also different times when it can be done.

If you have a mastectomy, your treatment team should talk with you about:

- whether you want a breast reconstruction
- what sort of breast reconstruction would work best for you
- when you might have breast reconstruction

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More about breast reconstruction

The type of breast reconstruction you have and when you have it depends on lots of things. For example:

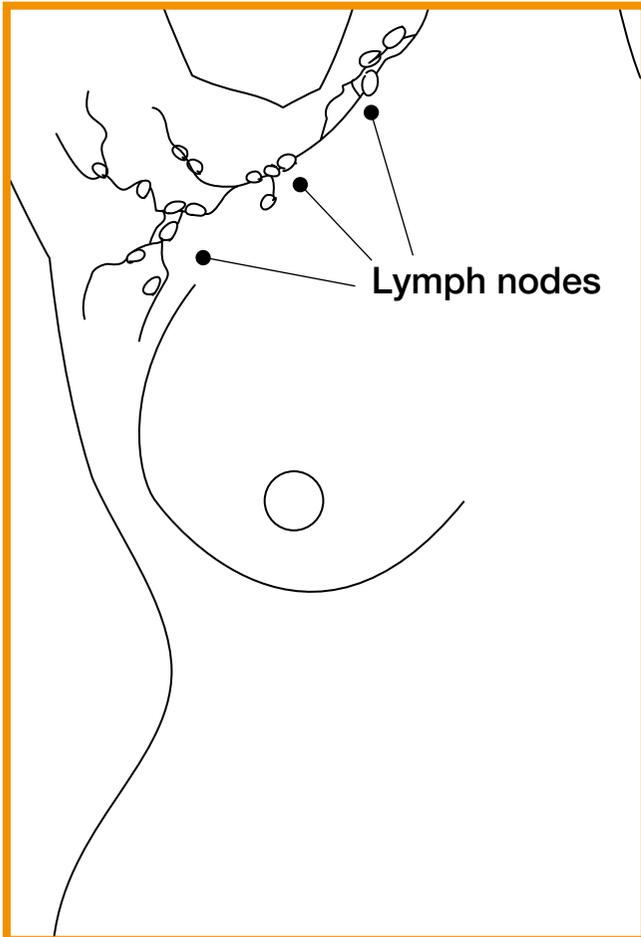
- your age
- your body shape
- your fitness
- the sort of breast cancer you have
- the breast cancer treatments you are having

Breast reconstruction done at the same time as your mastectomy is called immediate reconstruction.

Breast reconstruction done months or years after your mastectomy is called delayed reconstruction.

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What is lymph node surgery?



Lymph node surgery is an operation to take away glands from under your arms. The glands are called lymph nodes.

The lymph nodes are part of the lymph system. The lymph system is made up of small tubes and nodes. It runs all over your body, including around your breast, into your armpits and up your neck.

Because breast cancer sometimes spreads to the lymph nodes, there are two reasons for doing lymph node surgery.

- To take lymph nodes away if tests have already shown they have cancer in them.
- So that lymph nodes can be looked at closely to see if they have cancer in them.

Most people will have lymph node surgery.

Surgery

When do you have lymph node surgery?

When your lymph node surgery is done depends on if and when breast cancer cells are found in your lymph nodes.

Some tests and checks to find out if there are cancer cells in your lymph nodes can be done before your breast cancer surgery.

If these tests and checks show up cancer cells, you will usually have all the lymph nodes taken out from under your arm at the same time as you have your breast surgery.

Sometimes the only way to tell for sure if there are breast cancer cells in your lymph nodes is to take one or two of them during your breast cancer surgery. They are looked at under a microscope. If breast cancer cells are seen, you might need another operation to take out some or all of your lymph nodes.

Side effects

What are the side effects of surgery?

There are lots of possible side effects from breast cancer surgery. You probably won't have them all.

A lot of the side effects only last for a short while after you have had your operation. For example, feeling or being sick.

Some side effects might last a bit longer. These include the list below.

- pain
- bruising and swelling
- changes in feelings in your breast area or down your arm on the side where you have your operation
- stiff shoulder

Side effects

More about the side effects of surgery



A few side effects from breast cancer surgery can stay with you for good. These include the list below.

- Scars.
- A swelling of your arm, hand or breast area that can happen weeks, months or even years after your surgery. This swelling is called lymphoedema.

Always tell your breast care nurse or treatment team how your treatment is affecting you. They can often suggest things to help make side effects easier to cope with.

Information and support

Where can I find out more about my treatments?

There are more simple summary slides about treating primary breast cancer. Find them by clicking on subject areas at this website page [breastcancercare.org.uk/primary treatment](https://breastcancercare.org.uk/primary-treatment)

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Call our Helpline on **0808 800 6000**