

Tissue Expanders: What to Expect

A patient-to-patient FAQ about what to expect when having reconstructive surgery using tissue expanders.

Pre-Operative

Is there anything I can do to mentally prepare myself for tissue expanders?

Yes. Realize that breast reconstruction is a process that takes several months, but the results are worth the wait.

Why does the process take so long?

It takes time for your muscles and skin to stretch. "Fill-ups" (to enlarge the expanders) can't begin until both drainage tubes are removed and the incision site is healed. In my case, this was about five weeks post-op.

Immediately After Surgery

Will I be in a lot of pain when I wake up from surgery?

I had a bilateral mastectomy and the tissue expanders put in at the same time, and my pain was minimal. Breast tissue contains your nerve endings. So, when the tissue is removed, your sensitivity in that area is gone. However, the tissue expanders stretch your muscles and skin, which can be very uncomfortable.

What will I look like?

I woke up in a white surgical bra with a zipper in front and Velcro straps so I could get in and out of it easily. I was pleasantly surprised that I didn't look flat. In fact, my new breasts (or the start of them) were higher and perkier than the originals. The surgical incisions went across my breast where my nipples used to be. My areolas were covered with surgical tape. I also had drainage tubes on both sides.

Will my movement be limited?

Putting pressure on your chest area (i.e., trying to sit up or get out of bed) is uncomfortable at first, kind of like a strained muscle. And, if you have drainage tubes, they're always in the way!

Will I need a lot of pain medication?

I was on pain meds for two days in the hospital but stopped taking them when I got home -- and was fine. I also took muscle relaxers but found they didn't provide much relief and made me sleepy. If you don't mind being groggy, the muscle relaxers may help relieve the tightness in your chest.

The First Month

Will I look normal in clothes?

I did, and I didn't wear a bra either!

What do the expanders look and feel like?

My expanders settled differently on each side; one was higher than the other. They are oval-shaped and very hard. I could see and feel hard ridges under my skin (the edges of the tissue expanders). Also, my expanders stuck out on the sides, making it difficult to shave under my arms.

Will I be uncomfortable?

I'll be candid: the tissue expanders are very uncomfortable. Imagine having bowling balls where your breasts used to be. I wasn't in pain but had trouble finding a comfortable resting position. I couldn't sleep on my side because the expanders stuck out, and forget about sleeping on your stomach.

The "Fill-Up" Process

When can I have my first fill-up?

It's different for everyone but definitely not before both drainage tubes are removed; I had my first fill-up five weeks after surgery.

How many fill-ups will I need?

Again, it's different for everyone. Factors include how much saline (if any) was put into the expanders during the placement surgery, how much saline is injected during each fill-up and how big you want your new breasts to be.

Do the fill-ups hurt?

Mine didn't. I could feel the prick of the needle and pressure as saline went into the expanders. However, be prepared to feel sore after each fill-up; your muscles and skin are stretching to accommodate the additional saline. You may also feel tenderness where the needle was inserted.

Will my breasts look bigger after each fill-up?

Yes!

How much saline is injected at each fill-up?

It depends. I usually had about 50 cc's injected on each side (the needle looks huge!). However, my right side was sorer than the left so we started cutting back on cc's to the right side (20 or 30 cc's at a time). It made the process last longer but helped lessen my discomfort.

Can I exercise with tissue expanders?

Normally, I work out every day but didn't exercise for six weeks after the initial surgery. Bouncing around is very uncomfortable so, once I was cleared to resume physical activity, I limited exercising to elliptical machines and fast walking.

After my final fill-up, how long do I have to wait for the “exchange” surgery?

I had to wait about three weeks for my exchange surgery, enough time for the skin and muscles to stretch after the last fill-up.

Is there anything I can do to help prepare myself for the exchange surgery?

Relax. The worst is over.

Exchange Surgery and Beyond

Is the surgery to replace the expanders with permanent implants painful?

Not for me. I didn't take any pain meds following surgery and was able to go home that day.

Will I feel immediate relief from the discomfort of the expanders?

The implants are much softer, so no more walking around with bowling balls for breasts. But your chest will feel tight for awhile. As of this writing, I'm six weeks out and still feel tightness (like wearing an underwire bra I can't take off). I'm told the pulling and tightness will lessen over time.

Do the implants look natural?

Mine do, and the scarring is minimal. Occasionally, I will see a ridge or bump sticking out of my skin. I've been reassured that as the implants settle, the ridges will become less noticeable.

How do the implants feel?

Mine are gel and feel smooth, much more so than my dense, squishy breast tissue.