

Tissue Expanders for Breast Reconstruction

What you need to know

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

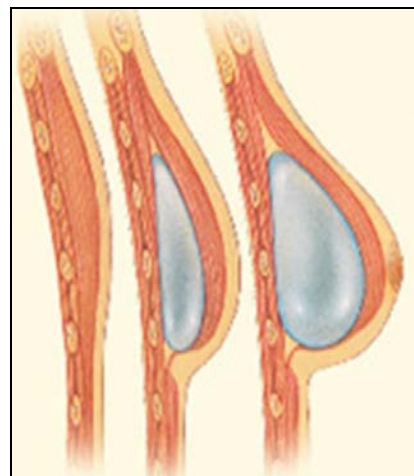
What are tissue expanders?

Tissue expanders are firm implants that can be filled with saline over time. They are used for a short time, in the first phase of breast reconstruction.

A tissue expander lies under your skin and muscle. It stretches and prepares your skin for final 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. At these visits, saline is added through a *port* (opening) in the expander. Over time, the pocket of skin and muscle will stretch to create your final breast size.



A tissue expander stretches the muscle to create a pocket for the permanent breast implant.

What can I expect after the expander is placed?

Everyone feels pain from tissue expanders differently. Some women have only mild discomfort, and others have stronger pain.

You will be given pain medicine after your tissue expanders are placed. Be sure to use this medicine as directed. Most women feel better by 3 to 4 weeks after surgery. Call the Center for Reconstructive Surgery at 206.598.1217 if you are having problems controlling your pain.

Pain Control

While you have the tissue expander, it is normal to feel tightness in your chest and even pain in your back and ribs. There are many medicines that you can take to manage your pain.

Right after surgery, you will be given a prescription *opioid* medicine for pain. Most women are able to reduce (*taper*) their use of opioids before their first expansion visit.

Other medicines that may help if you have discomfort with the expander include:

- Non-prescription medicines:
 - Acetaminophen (Tylenol), 650 mg every 6 hours
 - Starting 48 hours after surgery, you may also take ibuprofen (Advil), 600 mg every 6 hours OR naproxen (Aleve) 220 to 440 mg (1 to 2 pills) twice a day

*Do **not** take ibuprofen or naproxen if you have had gastric bypass surgery, gastrointestinal ulcers, or allergies to these medicines.*
- Prescription muscle relaxer medicines:
 - Methocarbamol, 500 to 1,000 mg every 6 hours as needed. This may be especially helpful before and after your expansions.

Your First Expansion

You will come for a clinic visit about 3 weeks after surgery for your first tissue expansion. This is usually done by a Plastic Surgery Physician Assistant. If you still have a drain in place, it may be removed at this visit.

This visit usually lasts 20 to 30 minutes. It is normal to have some extra tightness and soreness in your chest for a few days after the expansion.

Before your first expansion, you may prepare by taking these medicines with food 2 hours before your appointment:

- Ibuprofen, 600 mg **OR** naproxen, 220 mg
- and**
- Methocarbamol, 500 to 1,000 mg

*Only take methocarbamol if you have someone who will drive you to your appointment. Do **not** drive while taking this medicine.*

Dental Cleanings

To lessen your risk of infection, please delay any routine dental cleanings for 3 months after surgery, or until your surgeon says it is OK. If you need urgent dental work, please call the clinic for a prescription for a single dose of antibiotics to take before the procedure.

Incision Care

- You will receive instructions about removing your dressings (bandages). These can usually be removed 48 hours after surgery.
- You will also receive instructions about taking care of the drain(s) you will most likely have after surgery. A drain removes fluid and blood that build up in the area of your surgery.

- Check how your incision and the skin around your incision look when you remove the dressings. 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.
- Call the clinic **right away** at 206.598.1217 if you have:
 - Redness (sometimes looks like a light blush or sunburn)
 - Drainage that contains pus or smells bad
 - Increased pain
 - Warmer skin over the expander
 - Fever higher than 100.5°F (38.1°C)
 - Opening at the edges of the incision

Questions?

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

Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., call the Center for Reconstructive Surgery at 206.598.1217 and press 8.

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206.598.6190 and ask for the resident on call for Plastic Surgery to be paged.