The goal of breast cancer surgery is to remove the entire tumor from the breast. Some lymph nodes from the underarm area (axillary lymph nodes) may be removed to check for cancer cells.

**Types of breast cancer surgery**

There are 2 types of breast cancer surgery: lumpectomy and mastectomy.

If both types are an option for you, weigh the risks and benefits of each with your doctor to choose what’s best for you. Survival is the same for lumpectomy plus radiation therapy and mastectomy.

Your treatment plan may also include chemotherapy, hormone therapy and/or HER2-targeted therapy. These drug therapies help kill any cancer in the body after surgery. Drug therapies are given based on the characteristics of the tumor, not the type of surgery you have.

**Lumpectomy:**

With a **lumpectomy**, the surgeon removes the tumor and a small amount of normal tissue around it. The rest of the breast remains. How the breast looks after a lumpectomy depends on the amount of tissue removed and the location of the tumor.

It’s sometimes called breast-conserving surgery.

Radiation therapy is usually given after a lumpectomy to get rid of any cancer cells that might be left in or around the breast.

**Mastectomy:**

With a **mastectomy**, the whole breast is removed. In some cases, radiation therapy is given after a mastectomy.

**Total (simple) mastectomy:**

The surgeon removes the whole breast and the lining of the chest muscle, but no other tissue.

**Modified radical mastectomy:**

The surgeon removes the whole breast, the lining of the chest muscle and some of the axillary lymph nodes.

**Skin-sparing mastectomy and nipple-sparing mastectomy**

If you are having breast reconstruction at the same time as a mastectomy, the surgeon may be able to use a skin-sparing or a nipple-sparing technique.

A skin-sparing mastectomy saves as much of the skin of the breast as possible. The plastic surgeon can use this skin to help form the reconstructed breast. A nipple-sparing mastectomy keeps the nipple and areola (the darkly shaded circle of skin around the nipple) along with the skin.
Which surgery is best for you?
Ask your surgeon (and plastic surgeon) which options are best for you and why.

- If you cannot drive every day to get radiation therapy (which is needed with a lumpectomy), a mastectomy may be a better option.
- Your lifestyle may play a part in your decision. You may choose a lumpectomy because you want to keep as much of your breast as possible. Or you may feel having a mastectomy offers you better peace of mind.

Breast cancer is complex. You may want to get a second opinion to confirm your doctor’s recommendations or give you a different insight into your treatment plan.

Questions you may want to ask your doctor

- How will this surgery help guide my treatment plan?
- Will some or all of the lymph nodes in my underarm area be removed?
- How long will I be in the hospital?
- What short-term side effects should I expect?

The Questions to Ask Your Doctor – Breast Cancer Surgery has more questions and a place to write notes when talking with your doctor.

Side effects and what to expect after surgery

With a lumpectomy, you’re likely to have numbness along the surgical incision (scar) and some soreness in the chest, underarm and shoulder.

With a mastectomy, you’ll be numb across your chest (from your collarbone to the top of your rib cage.) This numbness may not go away. You’ll also have some soreness in the chest, underarm and shoulder.

If axillary lymph nodes are removed, you may have some numbness in your arm. You may also be at risk of lymphedema. Lymphedema occurs when fluid collects in the arm (or other area such as the hand, fingers, chest or back), causing it to swell.

Talk with your doctor about other long-term effects. Get back to your normal routine when you can and as approved by your doctor.

You’re not alone

Many people have been where you are today. Others who’ve gone through breast cancer surgery may be willing to share their stories.

Ask a member of your health care team (doctors, nurses or social workers) where to find a support group. You may be able to find a support group online such as the Komen Breast Cancer Facebook group. This group provides a safe place where those with a connection to breast cancer can discuss their experiences and build strong relationships with each other.