

Naturopathic Approaches to Breast Surgery

Pre-Surgery Care

For starters, a healthy person makes a healthier surgery patient. This means taking time to eat a balanced diet, exercise, get fresh air and relax. Many people will stay busy before surgery to keep their mind occupied. However, pre-surgery can be a great opportunity to nurture yourself and stay present for what is happening.

Take time to visualize yourself going through the surgery. You may wish to symbolically let go of something if you are having your breast removed, or symbolically call something into your life if you are having breast enhancement or reconstruction.

Surgery can become a right of passage that takes on sacred and personal meaning for each individual. For example, one woman I work with painted a henna tattoo around her scar with her children to help reclaim her body.

You may also want to practice a particular relaxation, visualization or breathing exercise in advance so that just before the surgery you can use these same images. In a randomized study, patients who practiced deep breathing and relaxation required 50% less postoperative narcotics, and were considered ready for discharge by their surgeons 2.7 days earlier than the control groupⁱ. Another study found that patients who practiced relaxation had decreased post-operative pain, decreased narcotic use, decreased length of hospital stay, decreased post-operative blood pressure, heart rate and respiratory rate, and decreased anxietyⁱⁱ. Some ideas for visualization include; imagining yourself in a special place, surrounding yourself with white light, and hanging your worries on a worry tree. Many different breathing exercises can be used from yoga or qi gong. I personally like to picture an ocean of healing filling up my lungs and washing me clean.

One to two weeks before surgery it is crucial to stop taking the following herbs and supplements which can thin the blood and increase bleeding; Vit E, Vit C, ginkgo, feverfew, garlic, ginger, Asian ginseng and conventional blood thinners. Continuing your regular multivitamin is fine, and actually advisable to maintain optimum nutritional status. Fish oil supplementation in doses of 3-6 g/day do not effect coagulationⁱⁱⁱ.

Note: If you are a premenopausal woman with breast cancer, schedule your mastectomy or lumpectomy in the second half of your menstrual cycle (luteal phase). A number of studies have shown that this can increase survival rates^{iv}. If you are someone who feels very connected to the moon, you may choose to avoid surgery on the full moon because some people believe there is more bleeding at this time.

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Post-Surgery Care

Nutrition and Nutrients

People's digestive tracts are often sensitive after surgery, so plan ahead by preparing food that is nourishing and simple to absorb. Cook and freeze a number of soups to have brought to the hospital and/or to be eaten when you first get home. Try to include a protein source in each soup such as blended soft tofu, lentils, almond butter, egg drop, or organic chicken. Also use aromatic spices in the soups to aid digestion eg. ginger, garlic, cinnamon, clove, cardamom, thyme, fennel and anise. Preparing soup can be a great way for friends or family to show their support.

Post surgery nutritional supplements can be very helpful in enhancing the body's wound repair. Consider a good quality multivitamin plus additional Vit A, Vit C, Vit E and zinc. Often you can find a combination of A, C, E and zinc all in one. These vitamins have been shown to improve post-operative immune function and enhance wound healing^v. Make sure to take the zinc with food, however, because it can cause nausea when taken on an empty stomach. If you have pre-existing digestive problems, choose a liquid or chewable multivitamin.

Nausea and Anaesthetics

If you experience nausea from the anaesthetic, you can drink grated ginger tea and wear a magnet or use acupuncture on the acupuncture point PC6^{vi} (three finger widths/2 inches above the inner wrist crease in the center of your arm between the two tendons). A meta-analysis (collection of research) on acupuncture/acupressure for postoperative nausea and vomiting found that acupuncture/pressure resulted in prevention equivalent to standard anti-nausea drugs^{vii}.

If you are spacey and disoriented after anaesthetic or craving cold and carbonated drinks, use homeopathic Phosphorus 30CH – 2 pellets once daily for up to 3 days. If you are nauseous persistently, vomiting, or feel aggressive post surgery, use homeopathic Nux Vomica/Collubrina 30CH – 2 pellets once daily for up to 3 days. All homeopathic pellets should be dissolved under the tongue away from food. Homeopathic remedies act as messages to the body asking the body to self-correct. Connect with a naturopathic doctor or experienced homeopath for more information on homeopathy.

Herbs can be taken after surgery to encourage liver detoxification and clear out the anaesthetic. Milk thistle can be used in a capsule or tincture – for capsules use 150-200 mg three times daily and for tincture use 60 drops twice daily. Milk thistle is one of the few herbs that is better to take in capsule form because not all active constituents are water soluble. You may also find a good liver combination that includes herbs such as dandelion, beet root, artichoke or tumeric in addition to the milk thistle. Do not take liver herbs if you are dependent on medications that are effective only at a narrowly defined range (narrow therapeutic window), because the herbs can increase detoxification and

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clearance of medications. All herbs are best absorbed when taken away from food.

Wound Care

Follow the wound care directions given to you by your surgeon. Remember to change dressings as advised and keep the area clean. Once the incision site is closed superficially, you can use a herbal oil or salve topically to speed the rest of the wound repair. Salves that contain calendula, comfrey and St. John's Wort are especially good. Calendula is both a magical and healing herb that can be made into a tea or used topically. It grows beautifully in the garden and is a blessing to watch flower.

To reduce bruising and swelling post surgery, use homeopathic Arnica 30CH – 2 pellets once to twice daily for 3 days. You can also use Traumeel homeopathic cream topically around the breast but *not* over the open wound. Bromelain, a naturally occurring pineapple enzyme, decreases bruising and post-operative pain^{viii}. Bromelain is a natural anti-inflammatory that is a good alternative to non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs because it does not cause digestive upset. It reduces post-surgical swelling and has proven effective in a double-blind crossover trial^{ix}. There has been concern about the anticoagulant effects of bromelain. However, while bromelain acted as a blood-thinner in animal studies, human research fails to show that it thins the blood in any clinically significant way^x. Additionally, bromelain has anti-tumor activity and stimulates immune responses in breast cancer patients^{xi}. A typical dose is 500-750 mg 3 times daily away from food.

If pain persists after the first few days after surgery, consider a homeopathic. If the chest feels bruised or aching after three days, take homeopathic Bellis Perennis 30CH twice daily for 2 days. If there are shooting pains, numbness or tingling after surgery and you are forgetful, blue or sensitive to touch, use Hypericum 30CH. If the pain is out of proportion to the surgery, use Calendula 30CH. If you have stitching pains, are hypersensitive to touch and feel violated by the surgery, use Staphysagria 30CH. See a Naturopathic Doctor for more detailed prescriptions or if pain persists more than a few weeks after surgery.

Lymphatic Drainage

Often after surgery there is lymphatic swelling/lymphedema because the normal pathways of drainage have been disrupted. This can happen especially if lymph nodes have been removed or if there is extensive scar tissue. Mechanical therapies such as dry skin brushing, lymphatic massage, and arm exercises help with circulation. Additionally, herbs can be used to reduce swelling and increase lymphatic flow. These include burdock, calendula, goldenseal, red root, phytolacca, red clover, cleavers, wild indigo, scrophularia, stillingia and iris versicolor. Pre-mixed tinctures can be used such as Hoxsey Formula (many

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brands), the Healthy Breast Formula (Sat Dharam Kaur, 519-372-2755), Cleavers Combo (St. Francis) or custom made formulas. Herbs are natural drugs so see a qualified practitioner for doses and a combination that best suits you. If there are no qualified practitioners in your area, drink a pot of tea made from red clover, cleavers and calendula.

The final and most essential Naturopathic aspect of surgical care is the inner faith and knowledge that your body can heal. I have been lucky to work with many inspirational people who have deep trust in their bodies. I am reminded that an important part of my work is simply to witness the incredible healing power of nature!

Green, J. Naturopathic Approaches to Breast Surgery. In "My Breasts, My Choice: Journeys through Surgery" edited by Brown, Aslin and Carey. Sumach Press. Toronto. 2003.

ⁱ Petry, Judith J. **SURGERY** AND COMPLEMENTARY THERAPIES: A REVIEW. *Alternative Therapies in Health & Medicine*. 6(5): 64-74. Sep, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Petry, Judith. Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Bender NK, Kraynak MA et al. Effects of marine fish oils on the anticoagulation status of patients receiving chronic warfarin therapy. *Journal of Thrombolysis*. 1998;5;257-261

^{iv} Love, S. Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book. Third Edition. Perseus Publishing. N.Y. pg.376. 2000.

^v Petry, Judith. Ibid

^{vi} Dibble, SL et al. Acupressure for Nausea - Results of a pilot study. *Oncology Nursing Forum*. 27. pp 41-7. 2000.

^{vii} Lee A, Done ML. The use of nonpharmacologic techniques to prevent postoperative nausea and vomiting: a meta-analysis. *Anesth Anal*. 88:1362-1369.1999

^{viii} Petry, Judith. Ibid

^{ix} Tassman, G et al. A double-blind crossover study of plant proteolytic enzyme in oral surgery. *Journal of Dental Medicine*. 20;51-54.1965

^x Harris, JE. Interaction of dietary factors with oral anticoagulants: review and applications. *Journal of American Dietician Assoc*. 95;580-584.1995

^{xi} Eckert K et al. Effects of oral bromelain administration on the impaired immunocytotoxicity of mononuclear cells from mammary tumor patients. *Oncology Report*. 6;1191-1199.1999

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