

Breast care psychology appointment for women considering elective or risk-reducing breast surgery

Considering elective or risk-reducing breast surgery

Some women have a higher risk of breast cancer. This can be because they have inherited a particular gene (e.g. BRCA-1 or BRCA-2), or because there is a history of breast cancer in their family. When a high risk of developing breast cancer is identified, the option of an elective mastectomy may be considered to reduce the risk of someone getting a new diagnosis of breast cancer. This is an operation where one or both healthy breasts are removed.

Although this does not remove all risk of developing breast cancer, it reduces the risk of developing cancer for those at high risk but is not a treatment for reducing recurrence of a previous breast cancer. The procedure is not usually recommended for those with a low risk of developing breast cancer.

The decision is a serious one, because it is a big operation that cannot be reversed, and like all surgery has its own risks. There are additional considerations, such as whether to have a reconstruction or whether to wear prostheses.

You may already have been considering your choices for some time. You may also have talked to your partner and your family. You may have spoken to a Genetics Counsellor and Breast Care Surgeon about your risk of breast cancer, and how much elective/risk reducing breast surgery can reduce this risk. You may have talked with the Breast Care Surgeon and Plastic Surgeon about the different options (e.g. for reconstruction) and the risks and benefits of the operation(s).

Why do I need to see a breast care psychologist?

At first it may seem strange when your consultant surgeon refers you to a psychologist to talk about your consideration to have risk-reducing/elective mastectomy. Some people worry that their decision will be challenged, or that the psychologist has to make sure that they are not 'crazy' for wanting, or not wanting to take this option, or that they have to try and convince the psychologist that they really want this surgery to be able to have it.

This is not the case – seeing a psychologist is a normal part of the preparation for this procedure for all patients. The psychologist you see specialises in helping people with physical health concerns and is part of the breast care team. They are there to support you, and to help make your decision and experience as easy as possible.

How will seeing the breast care psychologist help me?

Every woman considering elective/risk-reducing breast surgery will be referred to see the breast care psychologist as part of their routine care with the Breast Care team.

The psychologist will provide a 'sounding board' to help you with the process of decision-making. They will give you time to explore your options (including pros and cons), motivations (e.g. to reduce risk, to reduce worry, to alter the appearance of your breasts), expectations, and your emotional, social, and physical wellbeing.

Sometimes it is difficult to talk with your partner or family because they have their own fears and worries, and their own opinions about what you should decide. The appointment with the psychologist is to help you feel assured that you have made the best decision for you.

The psychologist can also help you think about how you prepare for surgery and recovery, any support that you may need, and about decisions about reconstruction. On occasions, where women are experiencing cancer-related worry, the psychologist may recommend you access some support for this before deciding about whether to proceed with surgery.

What happens at the appointment?

The initial appointment will be at Queen Victoria Hospital or can be via video or telephone call. It will usually last around 50 minutes. It will give you an opportunity to talk about your experiences, including how your breast cancer risk was identified and the impact you feel it has had on you. You can talk about your thoughts, feelings, worries and motivations for having surgery, including your expectations about surgery and the recovery process, and identify any further information or support you may need. Sometimes the psychologist will recommend you meet more than once and may offer additional support.

You do not have to have decided already. This session is to help you think about which decision is best for you, but there is absolutely no time pressure. You can think about it if you need and ask for more sessions with the psychologist if you feel this would be helpful.

You will be asked to complete some questionnaires before your appointment and will have the opportunity to talk through these.

Following the appointment the psychologist will write a brief letter to you summarising the main issues discussed and any recommendations. A copy will be sent to the breast care team and your GP, and anybody else you think it would be helpful to send a copy to.

If you have any questions about this appointment, then please get in touch with the Psychological Therapies Team
e-mail qvh.psychologicaltherapy@nhs.net
telephone: 01342 414478

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