Intermountain® Healthcare

Surgical (Open) Breast Biopsy: *Home Instructions*

This fact sheet provides an overview of the surgical breast biopsy procedure, what to expect after the procedure, and how to care for yourself at home. Always follow your doctor's instructions if they are different.

What is a surgical breast biopsy?

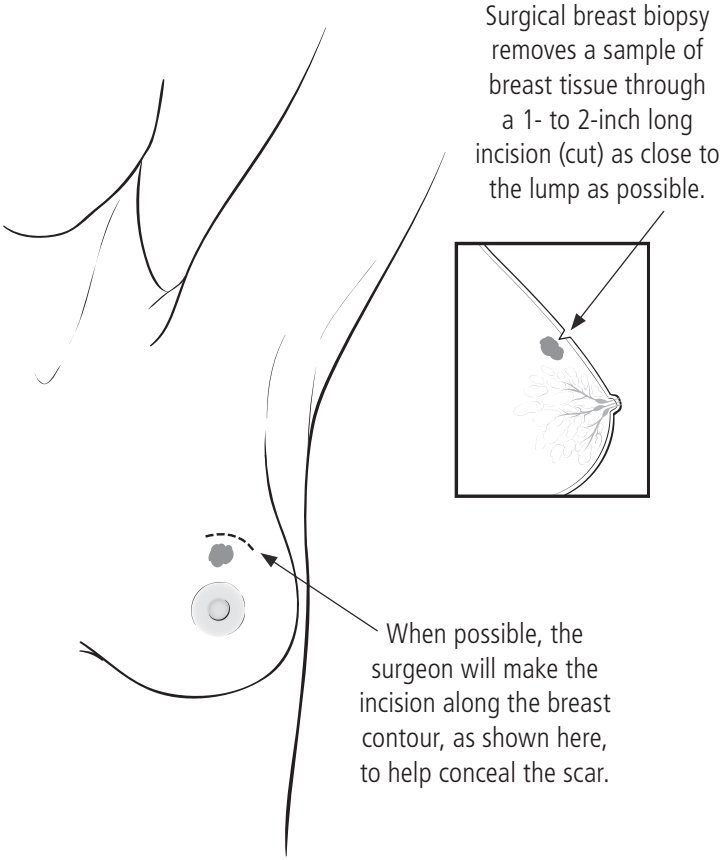
A surgical breast biopsy (often called an **open breast biopsy**) is a minor operation in which a short incision is made through the skin of the breast to allow the doctor to remove a small amount of breast tissue. Although many breast biopsies are done by removing a tissue sample through a needle, your doctor has determined that this surgical (incision) approach is best for your situation.

Why do I need it?

The purpose of the biopsy is to determine if the breast tissue is cancerous — not to treat breast cancer. The most common reason for a breast biopsy is because an abnormal area is found on an imaging test such as mammography or ultrasound. An abnormal physical finding such as a lump or thickened area of the breast may also indicate the need for a biopsy. The good news is that about 80% of breast biopsies in the U.S. show no cancer. However, it's important to check.

Talking with your doctor about this procedure

Before your surgery, your doctor will meet with you to describe the surgery and discuss the potential benefits, risks, and alternatives for the procedure in your unique situation. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Your discussion with your doctor is the most important part of learning about your surgery and what to expect.



What should I expect after the procedure?

- **Closing your incision:** After the tissue sample is taken, the incision is closed with small sutures (stitches) or strips of tape (steri-strips), and a dressing may be applied.
- **Monitoring your recovery.** After the procedure you will be taken to a recovery room where your vital signs (temperature, pulse, breathing rate, and blood pressure) will be monitored for about an hour or more.
- **Going home:** You can usually go home the same day. You should arrange for someone to drive you home. Before you leave, your nurse will give you instructions. Make sure someone is there to take notes, because after surgery you may not remember everything.

How do I care for myself at home?

- **Activity:** Avoid intense exercise or heavy lifting for the first week. Otherwise, usual activities are fine.
- **Work:** The surgery is a minor procedure and you can resume most activities in one or two days. Ask your doctor about when you can return to work.
- **Incision care:**
  - Your doctor will let you know when you can remove your dressings — and when it's okay to take a bath or shower without worrying about getting your incision wet. In most cases, you can bathe or shower within 1 to 2 days.
  - If you have steri-strips, you can usually leave them in place until they fall off (usually within 7 to 10 days). Your doctor may remove them, along with any stitches, at your follow-up visit. If the edges of the steri-strips start to peel, you may trim them back. Let your doctor know if the steri-strips irritate your skin. In this case, you may need to remove them earlier.
  - Watch for signs of infection at the incision site (increased redness or swelling, pus, or fever over 101° F) and report them to your doctor.
- **Pain management:**
  - After the test, your breast may be sore and tender to the touch for several days, and you may notice some bruising. Your doctor might prescribe pain medication. You can also use ice packs or an over-the-counter pain reliever.
  - If you had general anesthesia, you may also have a sore throat from the breathing tube used to keep your airway open during the procedure. This should go away in 1 to 2 days.

How do I find out the results?

The breast tissue sample will be sent to a lab to be analyzed. Analyzing the tissue sample shows whether the tissue is **benign** (non-cancerous) or **malignant** (cancerous). If the biopsy shows you have cancer, it also tells your doctor what type of cancer it is and helps guide your treatment plan.

Your doctor will let you know how long it should take to get results, and how you will be notified. Keep your follow-up appointment to discuss your results with your doctor. Your doctor will also remove your stitches or steri-strips during your follow-up visit if necessary.

Questions for my doctor:

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When should I contact my doctor?

Call your doctor if you experience any of the following during the week after the biopsy, or as otherwise instructed:

- A fever higher than 101° F
- Redness or swelling at the biopsy site that increases rather than gradually going away
- Severe pain at the biopsy site
- Other: _____

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