

# A GUIDE TO HAVING SURGERY DURING YOUR CANCER TREATMENT

For most people, the thought of having surgery will feel way out of their comfort zone. It's normal to feel anxious or to have lots of questions. But although it's going to feel like a big deal for you, for the people who are doing it – it's completely normal and all part of a day's work. They're absolute experts and will make sure that you're safe and the experience is straightforward and pain-free. This guide will help you know more about what surgery involves, and feel reassured if you're worried about how you'll look and feel after it.

## What is surgery and why might I need it?

Surgery is another form of treatment. In medical terms, it means making physical changes to your body with specialist knowledge and equipment, in an operating theatre at a hospital.

When you're diagnosed, you might need to have an operation called a 'biopsy'. This is when a small piece of your tumour is removed to see if it contains cancer cells. If it does, you'll probably need more surgery to remove the tumour at some point during your cancer treatment.

Depending on what cancer you have, surgery might be part of your treatment plan. If you have a tumour in a specific place, surgery could be the main way of getting rid of it, although you might also need chemotherapy or radiotherapy to destroy any remaining cancer cells.

If your tumour is big, or if taking it off your body might damage another part of you, you might need to have chemotherapy or radiotherapy first to shrink it. This is more likely to make an operation to take the tumour off you successful.

Or, the biopsy might be the only operation you need.

## How is surgery done?

Biopsies are often done under local anaesthetic, medication which numbs an area of the body while you're awake.

For most other operations, you'll have general anaesthetic. This is medication which sends you to sleep while the operation takes place. When you wake up, the operation will be finished.

### Dealing with anxiety

Being put under general anaesthetic for an operation can feel scary and you might have specific fears about what might happen. Talk to your doctor or nurse. They will be able to answer your questions and dispel any common misconceptions. Remember, the team of people doing your surgery are experts and will be monitoring you the whole time to make sure you're safe and well.

## Will I be in pain after surgery?

You might have some discomfort around the area that was operated on but painkillers will ease it. If you're still in pain, tell the nurses as they can help with this.

You'll probably have antibiotics to prevent infection and be taught breathing and exercises to reduce the risk of chest infections and blood clots.

## Will I have a scar?

You may well do as scars are common after treatment. Scars always look worse straight after surgery when they are red and obvious. But they often fade with time.

If you want to make your scar less visible, you can get skin camouflage makeup from high street shops. You could experiment with makeup trends, design a tattoo to enhance or hide a scar, or treat yourself to some skincare products. Make sure whatever you decide to do makes you feel empowered and confident.

Scarring can be difficult to accept and adjust to. If it affects your confidence about your appearance, you could talk to your healthcare team about speaking to a counsellor. It's particularly important if you're feeling anxious or depressed to talk to someone. They might be able to help you make positive changes so you can feel better about yourself.

### More support with scarring

If you have changes to your body after surgery and need emotional or practical support, the charity Changing Faces might be able to help. Their website has useful information and booklets about scarring, and details about their skin camouflage service. Visit [changingfaces.org.uk](https://www.changingfaces.org.uk) or call **0300 0120 275**.

## My surgery will be life changing – how will I cope?

In some cases, surgery can be life-saving but also life changing. Some people need to have an arm or leg removed in order to treat their cancer. This kind of surgery will inevitably be shocking and difficult to come to terms with, physically and emotionally.

If you need this type of operation, you will get lots of support from your team before and after your operation to help prepare and cope afterwards. They will also give you details of specialist organisations that are there to give you advice and information, such as the Limbless Association. You can visit [limbless-association.org](https://www.limbless-association.org) or call their helpline on **0800 644 0185**.

### Who are we?

CLIC Sargent is a charity dedicated to supporting young people like you. We help people with cancer aged 24 and under from diagnosis onwards. To find out more about how we can help you and your family, or for more information about living with cancer, visit [clicsargent.org.uk](https://www.clicsargent.org.uk)