



Is a 24-hour recovery possible after breast implant surgery?

Brisbane-based **Dr Daniel Fleming**, who performs more breast implant operations than any other doctor in Australia, explains a new technique which can substantially reduce post-operative pain and recovery times.

After patients have had a breast augmentation procedure, they are often given advice that goes something like this:

- You will need a week off work and maybe longer if your job involves more physical activity
- Take it very easy for the first few days
- Expect to have quite a bit of pain
- Strong painkillers and muscle relaxants will be provided
- You must not put your hands above your head during the first week
- You shouldn't drive a car for a week
- Avoid physical exercise for six weeks

Sometimes other advice is also given such as:

- Drains will be needed for the first 24-48 hours, perhaps even longer
- You must wear a special bra or be bandaged 'to keep the implant in place'

Most people will agree all this advice can seem rather daunting for the prospective breast implant patient – and is this the right advice? Are all these restrictions really necessary?

With the exception of drains and bras and bandaging I had given this advice to my patients for many years. It works and so I carried on giving it. I did often wonder, however, if I was just giving the same advice simply because it was what I had been taught and because it was standard practice.

I then read an article written by Texas plastic surgeon Dr John Tebbetts, a world leader in breast implant surgery. He claimed he could achieve a predictable 24-hour return to normal activities, with the exception of aerobics and contact sports, in more than 90 percent of his patients.

He had surveyed his patients post surgery and found that nine out of 10 could go shopping or out for a meal, return to a non-physical job, drive a car, perform light domestic duties and lift 'normal-weighted' objects 24 hours after having breast implant surgery. He also claimed it made no difference to their recovery if the implants were placed in front or behind the muscle. Dr Tebbett didn't use drains or straps or bandaging and stated that complication rates were lower using his techniques. In fact, patients were encouraged to put their arms above their heads before they even left the day surgery.

When I first read this article I simply did not believe it. However, I knew my patients really wanted to reduce recovery times, so I further investigated Dr Tebbetts' technique and started using it myself.

The critical element of the technique is a method of dissection of the implant pocket that aims to reduce blood loss to only 1ml per side. If this is achieved there is no blood staining of the pocket. It also reduces post-operative inflammation and therefore pain. Dr Tebbetts claims it also will reduce the incidence of the complication of capsular contracture (hardening around the implant). Although in theory this is reasonable, it has not yet been proved.

Since to perform the technique, a dry operating field is necessary and the only local anaesthetic is used for the skin incision, 'twilight sedation' cannot be used. Light general anaesthesia keeps the patient asleep and also allows the anaesthetist to relax the chest muscles if the implant is to be placed behind the muscle. Special instruments and operating techniques are used to dramatically reduce the amount of bleeding in almost all cases. Because there is less pain, fewer medications for pain relief are needed post-operatively. This also contributes to a quicker recovery as all painkillers stronger than Panadol can, and often do, cause side effects, especially nausea.

Does it work?

I have noticed a definite and substantial reduction in the recovery times of my patients since I started using this technique. I have not encountered any disadvantages with it and now use it on all patients. Blood loss is significantly less than with previous methods. I aim, and not infrequently achieve, blood loss of 1 ml per side, but 2 to 3ml is more typical. Patients have different pain thresholds and no patient can be promised a 24-hour recovery time, although some do experience this. Patients are advised that, apart from gym, aerobics and contact sports, after 24 hours they can perform any activity unless it causes pain. All of my patients are asked to complete a recovery survey and many only need Panadol to manage any discomfort. Most can go shopping, out to dinner and drive a car after 48 hrs.

So I am a convert to the Tebbetts technique. Patients considering breast implant surgery who want to reduce their recovery time should be aware of the technique and



Actual patient of Dr Fleming

should ask their surgeon what experience he or she has in using it. **acsm**

While some people may only need 48-hours to recover from breast augmentation surgery, if you're a dancer in the Moulin Rouge like this patient of Dr Fleming (see pic below), you will need a bit longer!

Elise Eggleton spoke with two of Dr Fleming's patients who underwent breast implant surgery using the Dr Tebbetts' technique.

Patient 1

KerriLee underwent breast augmentation surgery with Dr Fleming in June this year. She had her implants inserted through the infra-mammary fold, and placed underneath the muscle.

Considering KerriLee had undergone surgery, she says she felt remarkably good after the procedure and returned home the same day, taking Panadol to manage the discomfort. 'I experienced very little post-operative discomfort. Upon returning home, it was not long before I could resume my normal activities – I was even able to cook dinner the same night of the operation.'

The following day, KerriLee was able to drive to the local shops to carry out some errands. 'I have a manual gear shift car, so I obviously had sufficient movement.'

Despite taking two weeks off work to recover from the procedure, she says she could have returned to work a week later. 'I had no bruising, which I thought was just amazing,' KerriLee says. 'My chest felt rather tight, but was not very swollen. My nipples were extremely sensitive, which caused the greatest discomfort. However taking Vitamin B6 supplements really helped with this.'

Patient 2

Nikki had a breast augmentation in June 2007 by Dr Fleming. She had the implant inserted behind the muscle and says she experienced a remarkably short recovery period.

Nikki took two Panadols four times a day for about a week after the operation, supplemented by one dose of an anti-inflammatory drug when she felt particularly tight across the chest.

The day after the operation, Nikki rested and went for a walk in the park and drove the car. 'I was also able to wash my hair and put my hands above my head without any problems,' she says.

Nikki, who works as a beauty therapist, had been prepared to take two weeks off work. 'However, I was back at work two days after the operation – although it was a light workload. Five days later I was right back into it – I even gave someone a massage!'

Four weeks later Nikki says she was playing competitive hockey.