

March 2024

# Workbook for Vagina & Vulva Construction Surgery in BC

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**TRANS CARE BC**  
Provincial Health Services Authority

**Got any questions?  
We're here to help!  
Visit [transcarebc.ca](https://transcarebc.ca)**

# A message from the Trans Care BC Team

Dear Reader,

Thanks for picking up this workbook! It was put together by a team of trans folks and allies at Trans Care BC. Many of us have gone through gender-affirming surgeries, and we know it can sometimes feel like a long and confusing journey. We hope this book will be a source of help and comfort along the way.

By **vagina and vulva** construction surgery, we are referring to vaginoplasty and vulvoplasty surgeries. Vaginoplasty surgery is the removal of the penis, scrotum, and testes and the creation of a vulva (including mons, labia, clitoris, and urethral opening) and vagina. This guide is also for **vulvoplasty** surgery, which refers to the same outcomes, but without the creation of a vaginal opening.

Vaginoplasty and vulvoplasty are publicly funded for trans, Two-Spirit and non-binary individuals in British Columbia. This workbook contains a summary of how to access these procedures. For more in-depth information, including all the answers to your Frequently Asked Questions, please visit our [website](#). The workbook you are holding is a companion to this website, with extra worksheets, exercises, and checklists.

This workbook is meant to be a resource for keeping track of information related to your gender-affirming surgery. Some parts may not apply to you, and there may be some sections you don't want to fill in. That's ok! What you do with this workbook is up to you.

There are many diverse experiences people have had with vaginoplasty and vulvoplasty surgery, and it isn't possible to capture it all in one resource. It is valuable to connect with other people who have had this surgery and learn from their experiences

A note on privacy and confidentiality: If you enter personal information that you wouldn't want other people to know, it may be helpful to treat this workbook as you would your travel passport or Care Card.

**Please remember this workbook does not replace the information you receive from your surgeon. If there are any differences, you should always follow the advice provided by your surgeon.**

Finally, Trans Care BC's Health Navigation Team is available to help you at any point in this process. We wish you all the best!

Sincerely,

The Team at Trans Care BC

**Health Navigation Team:**

**Phone: 1-866-999-1514**

**Email: [transcareteam@phsa.ca](mailto:transcareteam@phsa.ca)**

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# Accessing surgery

## CONNECT WITH A DOCTOR OR NURSE PRACTITIONER

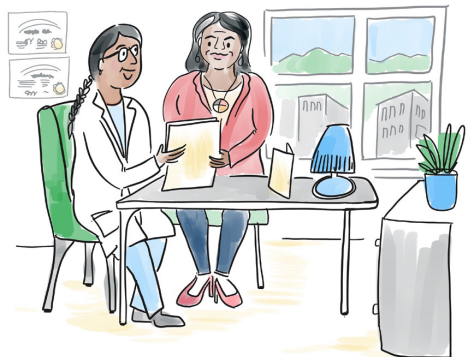
The first step to accessing vaginoplasty or vulvoplasty is to connect with a doctor (GP) or nurse practitioner (NP). The role of the GP or NP is to support you in accessing the care you need. This includes:

- ▽ providing or referring you for a Surgical Readiness Assessment,
- ▽ helping you meet surgical requirements, and
- ▽ assisting with things you need after surgery.

Surgical assessments for genital surgery may only be conducted by medical providers (physicians, nurse practitioners and registered nurses) who have received the training outlined in the WPATH Standards of Care (Version 8) and are on the list of qualified assessors maintained by Trans Care BC.

Your GP or NP may be able to provide a surgical readiness assessment. If they cannot, ask them to refer you to a surgical readiness assessor. If they don't know one, they can refer you to Trans Care BC to provide an assessment or you can contact the health navigation team for more options.

If your GP or NP would like information about how to support you during your post-operative healing period, they can call the Trans Care BC Health Navigation Team.



# APPOINTMENT INFORMATION

## My Doctor or Nurse Practitioner

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Appointment Date and Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Appointment Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

## My Surgical Readiness Assessor

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Appointment Date and Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Appointment Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

**PRO-TIP** You might want to store this information in your phone or calendar, too.

## GET A SURGICAL READINESS ASSESSMENT

You will meet with a qualified surgical assessor for Surgical Readiness Assessment.

The Surgical Readiness Assessment confirms that you meet the criteria for vaginoplasty or vulvoplasty. It also helps ensure you are prepared and supported before, during, and after your surgery.

See Trans Care BC's [website](#) to learn more about what to expect during a Surgical Readiness Assessment and other frequently asked questions.

## SEND COMPLETED INFO PACKAGE TO SURGICAL CENTRE(S)

In BC, publicly-funded gender-affirming vaginoplasty or vulvoplasty surgery can be done at GSP BC (Vancouver) or GRS Montreal. Once your assessments are complete and your referral has been sent, the surgical centre(s) will add your name to their waitlist.

See Trans Care BC's [website](#) to learn more about how to send referrals to the different clinics, and other frequently asked questions.



## DATE OF SURGERY

## HAVE A SURGICAL CONSULT

A surgical consult is an appointment with your surgeon to talk about your goals for surgery and your options in terms of procedures. It's also an opportunity for you to ask questions.

See Trans Care BC's [website](#) to learn more about what to expect during the surgical consult appointment and other frequently asked questions.

Here are some tips on how to prepare for this appointment:

- Attend a GSP BC [Surgery Education Class](#).
- Read up on the surgery you are interested in:
  - Rainbow Health Ontario: [Vaginoplasty](#)
  - GRS Montreal: [Vaginoplasty](#)
  - GRS Montreal: [Vulvoplasty](#)
- Search online for before-and-after photos, including photos of people who have a body similar to your own.
- Have a list of your current medications and supplements (including traditional medicines, such as herbs and teas; vitamins; minerals; amino acids; and probiotics). Include the dose and how often you take them.
- Have a list of questions for the surgeon. You can find common questions in this workbook and online, on Trans Care BC's [website](#).
- Have a pen for taking notes.
- If there are any updates on your health since your initial referral was made, ask your GP or NP to send any relevant information to GSP BC.

## DATE(S) OF SURGICAL CONSULTS





## MY QUESTIONS FOR THE SURGEON

Make a list of questions to ask your surgeon during your consult. Some sample questions are listed below. Don't forget to have a pen handy so you can record the answers. You may also want to have a friend take notes so you can focus on the conversation.



## FAQS

**When should I arrive in Vancouver/Montreal for surgery?**

**When can I return home?**

**Can I see photos of surgical outcomes of your other patients who had this surgery?**

**What are the complications that could occur after the surgery?**

**How common are these complications?**

**What are the chances that I will need a revision with this type of surgery?**

**How long will the swelling last?**

**What happens during the time I spend at VGH/Asclépiade?**

**What should I do if I experience a new symptom after I return home?**

**Can I take [medication/vitamin/supplement] before surgery?**

**When can I return to work?**

**How do I know my vaginal discharge is healthy?**

**What do I need to do to take care of my prostate?**

**How long will it take to heal? What can I expect from the healing process?**



# other questions

# Preparing for surgery



## Please note!

This information does not replace the information you receive from your surgeon. If there are any differences, you should follow the information from your surgeon.

# BUY, BORROW, AND DO

## CLOTHING & BEDDING

- Loose comfortable clothing
- A nightgown and/or bathrobe
- Easy-to-slip-on skirt, pants and socks
- Easy-to-slip-on shoes
- Two weeks' worth of clean clothes
- Pillows to keep you comfortable and supported
- Put fresh sheets on the bed

## FOOD & HOME

- Prepare and freeze a week's worth of meals
- Stock up on groceries

## PERSONAL CARE (AS NEEDED)

- Get a hair cut
- Clip finger nails/toe nails/pedicure
- Avoid putting on artificial nails or nail polish before surgery (you will have a pulse oximeter on your finger to measure your oxygen levels, and nailpolish can affect the readings)
- Buy some pads and panty liners. Long ones work best.
- Pay your bills

## WORK (IF RELEVANT)

- Apply for a leave of absence from work (usually 8-12 weeks)
- Apply for Medical Employment Insurance
- Create a return-to-work plan with your employer

## MEDICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Follow your surgeon's instructions about stopping medications
- Buy any post-op supplies your surgeon recommended
- Stock up on your usual prescriptions and post-op medications
- Get Gravol or ginger to help with nausea (optional)
- Get prune juice or stool softeners to help prevent constipation (optional)
- Get the tests your surgeon requested
- Book post-op appointments with your doctor or nurse practitioner based on your surgeon's recommendations. Record on page 35 of this workbook.
- Consider filling out a Representation Agreement to name someone you trust to make healthcare decisions for you in case you are not able to make them yourself
- Register for Fair PharmaCare (you may be eligible to get your discharge prescriptions at a reduced cost with Fair PharmaCare Plan)
- Some providers charge fees for filling out paperwork (ie: for time off work or travel forms). Set aside some money (\$30-\$60) just in case it is needed

## EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Find meaningful activities you can participate in during the healing process (e.g. mindfulness, spiritual gatherings, meditation, support groups, sharing time with others)
- Stock up on items you use for ceremonial practices (e.g. smudge or brushing items)
- Stock up on art supplies (e.g. beading, cedar weaving, watercolor paints, sketchbook, etc.)
- Make appointments for before and after surgery with your counsellor, mentor, elder, knowledge-holder or mental health worker, if applicable
- Connect with others who have had this surgery
- Make a list of things you are looking forward to after surgery
- If a "good bye" ritual is important to you, consider how you might like to do this. For example, some people take photos, make other kinds of body art or document their healing experiences
- Write yourself a letter with words of encouragement for when you feel down

## PACK YOUR BAG

- Leave valuables, including jewelry, at home
- A place, such as a large ziplock bag, to keep the prescriptions and instructions you'll be given
- Photo ID, including BC Services Card
- Debit or credit card
- Plane tickets
- Skirt, pants, shoes & socks that easily slide on and off
- Outer clothing (jackets, boots) appropriate for the season
- Phone and charger
- A copy of your Representative Agreement if you made one
- Sanitary pads and panty liners
- Toiletries
- Small hand mirror
- Inflatable donut (sometimes called a hemorrhoid cushion)
- A pen
- Your ERAS booklet if you are having surgery with the GSP BC
- This workbook if you are having surgery with GRS Montreal

## Before you leave the hospital, check that you:

### KNOW

- What to do or who to call if you have a problem
- How to care for your surgical site(s)
- How to manage your pain
- How to prevent constipation
- What activity levels and activity restrictions are recommended
- What equipment you might need at home (if any)
- When you need to make a follow-up appointment

### HAVE

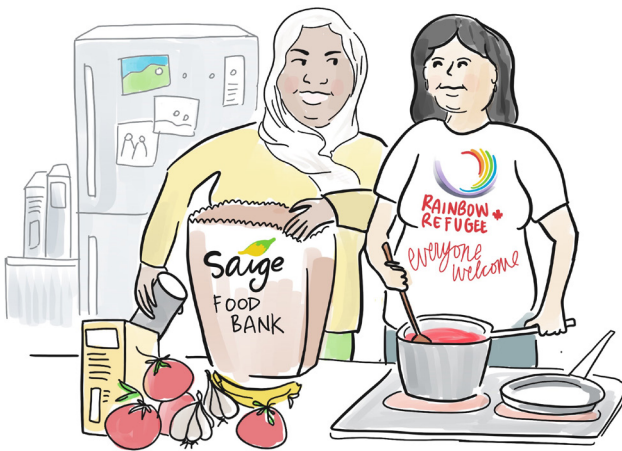
- All your personal belongings, including medicines
- Your house keys
- Your phone and charger
- Your new prescriptions
- Your discharge summary sheet, if you get one
- Any information booklets given to you
- Someone to stay with you the first few days at home for help

# Arrange Help!

You'll need some support after surgery. If you find it hard to ask for help, you aren't alone. Many people have a hard time with this.

Fortunately, lots of people like to help. It gives the helper a chance to feel good about themselves and a meaningful way to show they care. People often feel flattered and happy to pitch in, especially if you ask for help with something specific.

Keep in mind that if someone is not able to give the help you are asking for, they are not rejecting you. Thank them for being honest and then honour yourself for being so brave!



## important:

**You may want someone to travel with you. Keep in mind that this person's travel and accommodations will not be covered by MSP.**



Asking for help can take some practice. Here is an activity to help you get started.

- 1 Make a list of everything you need help with after surgery (eg. escort, meal preparation, child care, elder care, dishes, laundry, vacuuming, pet care, social visits, taking out the trash, rides to appointments, etc.).
- 2 Write down the names of people who have offered to help, or who you think would like to help. Don't forget the young people and elders in your life.
- 3 Match people based on their interests, strengths, time, flexibility and how comfortable you are with them.
- 4 Be courageous and ask for help. It's a good idea to schedule people for specific times. You may need support for up to six weeks after surgery.

## DRAW A LINE TO MATCH TASKS TO PEOPLE

I could use some help with...

people I can ask

**You can give the handout on the next page to people that are looking for ways to support you before and after surgery.**

# supporting someone having surgery

## WAYS TO HELP BEFORE SURGERY:

- Offer rides to and from appointments
- Offer to take notes during appointments
- Pick up supplies
- Help prepare food and groceries that promote wound healing:
  - Protein: meat, nuts, soy**
  - Zinc: whole grains, spinach, nuts**
  - Vitamin A: carrots, broccoli, eggs**
  - Vitamin C: citrus fruits, strawberries, peppers**
- Coordinate a schedule to help with meals, chores and visits after surgery (check out websites like MealTrain)
- Ask if there are any specific ways you can support them as they get ready for surgery
- Ask what it looks like when they feel low so you can recognize the signs.

## WAYS TO HELP AFTER SURGERY:

- Help with errands (pharmacy, grocery, pet supplies)
- Offer rides to and from appointments, events or spiritual gathering spaces
- Help with household chores:
  - water plants
  - walk pets
  - change litter box
  - laundry
  - vacuum
  - mow or shovel
  - get groceries
  - cook or bring a meal
  - do dishes
  - clean
  - change sheets
  - take out garbage, recycling & compost
- Schedule visits (for 2 months after surgery):
  - watch a movie
  - have some coffee or tea
  - go for a car-ride together
  - make a little picnic
  - visit a park, botanical or community garden, museum, etc.
  - play videogames
  - have a phone or video-chat hangout
  - play a board game or card game
  - craft
  - walk around the block or neighborhood
  - plan a short visit just to say hello
  - drop off groceries, a meal or a snack
- Ask if they need support with childcare or elder care
- Send an encouraging postcard (even if you live nearby)

It can be hard to ask for help, so check-in regularly to see how they are doing and what they need.

# Make Travel Arrangements

If your surgery is taking place outside your home community, you will need to arrange transportation and accommodations.

See Trans Care BC's [website](#) for tips on booking transportation and accommodation (as needed). It includes information about some options that may be available to you if travel and accommodation costs are a barrier.

## TRANSPORTATION DETAILS:

**To:**

**Date:**

**Time:**

**Travel details:**

**From:**

**Date:**

**Time:**

**Travel details:**

# Make a self-care plan

## staying healthy before surgery

You can reduce complications from surgery by starting the healing process beforehand. Below are some steps you can take before surgery to help your body recover. For most of us, these strategies are easier said than done. Remember that self-care includes doing what is manageable and trying to love ourselves no matter what.

See Trans Care BC's [website](#) for tips on staying healthy before surgery.

### A SELF-CARE ACTIVITY

You may find this activity helpful for reflecting on your current self-care practices, and planning ways to adapt or create practices that prepare you for surgery and the healing period that follows.

Dating back thousands of years, many First Nations and Native American nations developed and use Medicine Wheels to draw attention to the importance of nurturing and balancing our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being, throughout our life journey.



On the next few pages, we've outlined these four elements of wellness for you to reflect upon, in order to support your preparation for surgery, and the healing period that follows. Feel free to choose shapes and categories that work for you. Instead of the squares we provide, you may want to use the medicine wheel, a tree, a rainbow, or use categories related to your environment, finances, or job.

# self-care: before surgery

Use the boxes on the next page to write down self-care activities that you can do while you prepare for surgery. Here is an example of what could be in your boxes:

## social

- Make a big dinner with my friends every Wednesday
- Do crafts, like zines, art projects, etc.
- Go to the movies

## spiritual

- Visit temple
- Journal
- Attend sweats
- Write myself encouraging notes to read after surgery
- Meditate while sitting

## emotional

- Clean my house Friday night
- Go to counselling
- Play guitar

## physical

- Have a hot bath
- Swim
- Hike
- Have a massage

# self-care: before surgery

social

emotional

spiritual

physical

# self-care: after surgery

Use the boxes on the next page to write down self-care activities that you can do while you are healing from surgery. Be sure to keep activity restrictions in mind. Here is an example of what could be in your boxes:

## social

- Book social visits in advance
- Go for a picnic
- Go out for tea/meals with friends
- Do crafts, like zines, art projects, etc.
- Watch movies with friends
- Phone & video chat hangouts

## emotional

- Go to counselling
- Read notes I wrote to myself before surgery
- Listen to music, look at art, light candles
- Lie outside & watch clouds
- Ask for help with chores & errands

## spiritual

- Visit temple (someone drives me)
- Journal
- Speak with elders
- Smudge
- Sit quietly in nature
- Meditate while reclining or lying down

## physical

- Use a hot cloth on my face, neck and shoulders
- Eat meals I made in advance
- Go for a walk every day
- Diffuse essential oils

# self-care: after surgery

social

emotional

spiritual

physical



## PRACTICE BREATHWORK

“Connection breath” is an activity you may want to practice as you prepare for surgery.

There are four groups of muscles that protect our backs and internal organs. These muscles are especially important after surgery when we do things like bending down to put on our shoes. They also help prevent us from leaking urine when we cough, sneeze or exercise.

These muscles are the:

- ▽ diaphragm,
- ▽ abdominal muscles,
- ▽ back muscles along the spine
- ▽ pelvic floor muscles

For many of us, the muscles work but they are not well coordinated. Gentle activities can help them work together more efficiently. Doing these exercises on a daily basis is an excellent way to prepare for surgeries that affect these muscle groups (like vaginoplasty or vulvoplasty). They help reduce back and pelvic pain and release tension.

“Connection Breath” is an exercise that helps connect these four muscle groups:

- ▽ Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor.
- ▽ Place your Left hand on the side of your ribcage and your Right hand low on your belly, below your belly button.
- ▽ Inhale and relax:
  - ▶ Imagine the air inflating your belly and pelvic floor
  - ▶ Breathe in so that both your hands feel movement - your ribs expand sideways and your belly expands upwards
  - ▶ Imagine your pelvic floor muscles relaxing
  - ▶ It may take some practice until your ribs and your belly can expand at the same time. You can start with a long, slow breath that starts by inflating your chest and then try to add belly breathing partway through the inhalation

- ▽ Exhale and engage your muscles:
  - ▼ Blow the air out through your lips (like you are blowing out a candle)
  - ▼ While you breathe out, let your belly and rib cage come down and in slightly
  - ▼ While you are still exhaling, gently contract your deep pelvic floor muscles, which feels like you are trying to stop yourself from urinating or passing gas.
  - ▼ Your Right hand may feel a slight increase in tension in your lower abdominal muscles. If you don't feel this at first, keep practising and see if you can feel it over time.
- ▽ Try to do this for 10 breaths in a row, several times a day

For most people, the trickiest part of practising Connection Breath is developing a new habit. This includes remembering to do it at a time when you can actually do it. The best solution for this is to build a new habit - something that you just do every day without having to think about it. And the easiest way to build a new habit is to connect the new activity you want to do to something else that you already do, every day.

A handy way to build a habit is to use a Practice Sheet – you can download here:

- ▽ [Connection Breath Practice Sheet \(if you have a yoga mat\)](#)
- ▽ [Connection Breath Practice Sheet 2 \(if you don't have or use a yoga mat\)](#)



**I plan to download and print a  
“Connection Breath Practice Sheets”**

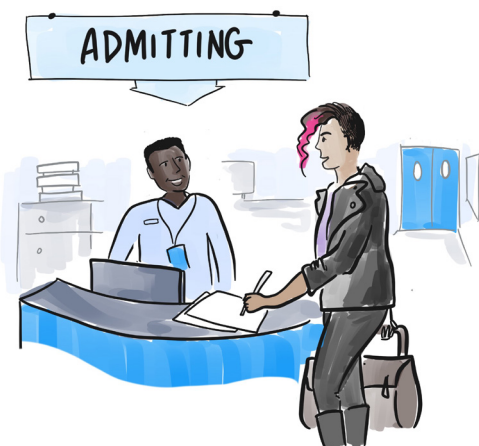
**Date:**

# know what to expect the days before your surgery

It can be helpful to have an idea of what to expect on the days before your surgery. You can ask your surgical team about this and speak with others who have had this procedure.



Trans Care BC's [website](#) also provides some descriptions about what to anticipate during the days before your surgery.



# post-surgical care

it is important to follow your surgeon's instructions for aftercare.

The information below does not replace the information you receive from your surgeon. If there are any differences, you should follow your surgeon's instructions.

## 1. monitor your surgical site

It can take up to a year to fully recover from vaginoplasty and vulvoplasty. During this time, expect the appearance of your genitals to change quite a bit.

### THE SURGICAL SITE

For the first few days after surgery, you will have:

- ▽ A large gauze dressing over your vulva,
- ▽ A surgical drain in your mons to stop fluid from building up in your body,
- ▽ A urinary catheter to drain pee,
- ▽ A stent (tube) inside your vagina to help keep it open (for vaginoplasty only)

### BRUISING AND SWELLING

It is normal to have bruising and swelling after surgery. The bruising may go from your hips to your knees. You may have more swelling on one side than the other and it can change throughout the day. It will go down gradually, taking up to 6 months to resolve.

Your vulva will get smaller as your swelling goes down. This might make it seem like you are losing vaginal depth because your vulva will cover less of the dilator when you are looking down at it. Keep in mind that the depth of your vagina is measured from your vaginal opening to the back, and not from the outer edge of the labia.

## **BLOOD CLOT ON CLITORIS**

It is normal to have a blood clot on your clitoris. Do not pull it off. It will fall off on its own.

## **CHANGES IN SENSATION**

It is common to have numbness or less sensation in some areas. It can take 6-12 months for the nerves to heal or grow back in these areas. Once in a while, you might even feel prickly, stinging, or burning sensations as the nerves heal and grow. There can be permanent changes to sensation, including areas of complete numbness or hypersensitivity. Most people maintain the ability to have an orgasm. See page 37 for more information.

## **PEEING**

In the first few months after surgery, your urine may spray or dribble rather than come out in a straight line. This is caused by swelling around the urethra, the opening that pee comes from. As the swelling goes down, the spraying and dribbling should stop.

## **VAGINAL DISCHARGE (FOR VAGINOPLASTY ONLY)**

Vaginal discharge is made up of lubricant, skin cells, and in some people, fluid from the bulbourethral glands. It may be coloured with small amounts of blood during the healing period. It is normal for vaginal discharge to have a healthy smell. If the smell changes a lot, or becomes very strong, speak with your surgeon, doctor, or nurse practitioner.

## **FIBRIN**

Fibrin is the yellowish stuff that builds up around the healing wounds on your vulva. Fibrin should dry up and fall off on its own. If your wound is too moist, the fibrin won't dry up and fall off. This is why you'll be asked to expose your surgical site to air as much as possible. If the fibrin is building up a lot and not falling off, speak with your healthcare provider.

## **INCISIONS AND SCARS**

Your incisions will be closed with sutures. These sutures will dissolve within 1-3 months. Talk to your surgeon if you find that your scars are starting to thicken up.

## 2. Take good care of your body

### CHECK FOR SIGNS OF INFECTION

Talk to your healthcare provider if you experience:

- ▽ Redness around your incisions
- ▽ Heat around the incisions
- ▽ Foul-smelling yellow or green discharge
- ▽ Chills or a fever over 38.5 degrees Celsius (101.3 Fahrenheit) by mouth
- ▽ An increase in pain at the surgical site

### CHECK FOR SIGNS OF URINARY TRACT INFECTION

Talk to your healthcare provider if you experience:

- ▽ Burning sensation when peeing
- ▽ Peeing often and in small amounts
- ▽ Pee that is cloudy, pink, or brown and foul-smelling
- ▽ Pain in your pelvis, back, or rectum
- ▽ Chills or a fever over 38.5 degrees Celsius (101.3 Fahrenheit) by mouth

### CHECK FOR SIGNS OF HYPERGRANULATION TISSUE\*

Talk to your healthcare provider if you experience:

- ▽ Bright red tissue that bleed easily
- ▽ Blood in your discharge or on your dilator
- ▽ Blood spotting in your underwear

It is not uncommon to develop hypergranulation tissue within weeks or months after surgery. There are various treatment options that your health care provider can suggest.

*\* Pink or red tissue that bleeds easily.*

## MANAGE PAIN

It is important to manage your pain well so that you can sleep through the night, slowly re-start your usual daily activities, and follow your dilation schedule.

- ▽ Make a pain medication schedule and stick to it. Don't wait to take medication once the pain is overwhelming, as your pain will be harder to control.
- ▽ You may wish to use the pain medication schedule on page 35.
- ▽ You can apply ice to the area as recommended by your surgeon.

## WASH HANDS FREQUENTLY

Always wash your hands with soap before and after touching your genitals. This will help prevent infection.

## TAKE SITZ BATHS

A few days after surgery, a nurse will show you how to take a sitz bath. A sitz bath involves bathing your genitals with warm, soapy water. Follow your surgeon's instructions about the type of soap to use and how to air dry your vulva afterwards.

## DILATE (FOR VAGINOPLASTY ONLY)

A few days after surgery, a nurse will show you how to dilate. A dilator is a device used to keep the width and depth of your vagina. You will be given a set of dilators with three different sizes and a schedule for using them. It is important to follow your dilation schedule because once width or depth has been lost, it cannot be regained again. Dilating can be uncomfortable, especially in the beginning. You may want to:

- ▽ Time your pain medication so that discomfort is well managed during dilation
- ▽ Urinate or have a bowel movement before you dilate
- ▽ Drink a small glass of water first
- ▽ Distract yourself with music, a podcast, movie, or guided meditation.

Dilating will become part of your regular routine throughout your life.

**Hot tip:** You may find this [guided mindfulness activity for dilation](#) by Dustienne at YourPaceYoga to be helpful while you dilate.

## **DOUCHE (FOR VAGINOPLASTY ONLY)**

A few days after surgery, a nurse will show you how to cleanse your vagina by douching. A douche is a device used to squirt saline solution (and later, water) into your vagina to clear out dead skin to help your body heal. Your surgeon will provide details about how often to douche. Douching will become part of your regular routine throughout your life.

## **EXPOSE VULVA AND PERINEUM TO AIR**

The vaginal opening and perineum (area between the vulva and anus) are often the slowest to heal. This is caused by pressure on the area when sitting; friction from dilation; and dampness from discharge, lube, and aftercare activities. Keep this area exposed to air as much as possible to help it dry out and heal well.

## **WALK**

Walk for 15-20 minutes at least 4 times a day. Walking helps to relieve pain, improve blood flow and prevent blood clots. It can also be good for your mood. If walking is not an option for you, speak with your health care providers about alternative options, like leg and deep breathing or coughing exercises.





# leg exercises

(or follow the instructions from your surgeon)

**Leg exercises help the blood to flow through your legs, keep your muscles strong and prevent stiff joints. They also reduce the chances of getting a blood clot.**

- 1 Keeping the heels of your feet on the bed, point your toes down toward the end of the bed.
- 2 Return to a normal resting position.
- 3 Point your toes back towards your chin.
- 4 Return to a normal resting position.
- 5 Keeping the heels of your feet on the bed, point your toes and move them in a big circle to rotate your ankles. Move your toes clockwise a few times, then counter clockwise a few times.
- 6 Rest for a short time.
- 7 Repeat this four more times.

# deep breathing exercises

- 1 Sit or lay comfortably & rest your hands on your ribs.
- 2 Take a deep breath in through your nose: imagine filling the bottom of your lungs first, then the middle, then the top. You might feel your ribs push against your hands.
- 3 Hold your breath while you say in your head, “This helps my body heal” or any meaningful word, phrase or sound or count of 3
- 4 Blow the air out slowly from your mouth, including pushing the last bit of air out from the bottom of your lungs. Pursing your lips can help you control your breath.
- 5 Repeat this 5 more times

## **GET LOTS OF REST**

You may feel very tired after surgery. Plan to do less activity during the day and allow yourself to nap. Your body needs extra sleep while you are healing. Relaxation techniques can help your body heal from surgery, too. They reduce the effects of stress on your body, letting your body's systems focus on the healing process.

## **DRINK LOTS OF WATER**

It is important to drink lots of water and empty your bladder regularly. This helps to prevent urinary tract infections. Drink enough water to have clear, light yellow-coloured urine.

## **MANAGE CONSTIPATION**

Constipation is a common side-effect of pain medication. If you experience this, try increasing the number of walks you take, drinking more water, eating more fruits and vegetables, eating prunes, or taking a stool softener. Get protein from food sources other than dairy. If constipation continues for several days, speak to your healthcare provider.

## **MESSAGE YOUR SCARS**

Massage your scars once your incisions close (usually around Week 4) using a cream recommended by your surgeon. Remember to wash your hands with soap before and after to prevent infection.

## **AVOID ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO**

Avoid alcohol for at least two weeks and tobacco for at least 6 weeks after surgery.

## **ATTEND YOUR CHECK-UPS**

It is a good idea to have appointments booked with your health care provider for when you get home from Montreal. Your health care provider will make sure your incisions are healing well. They may ask about pain, bleeding, bowel movements, fever, and how you are feeling physically and emotionally. They will also ask questions about how you are managing your dilations and aftercare activities.

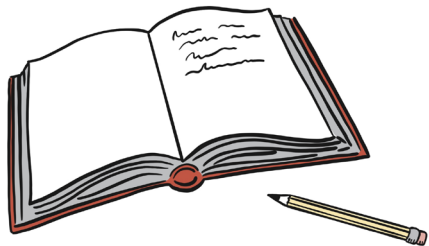


### 3. Beat the post-surgery blues

The after-effects of medications, surgery and the activity limitations required during recovery can lead to something called ‘post-operative blues.’ This can include feelings of low mood, loss of appetite, difficulty concentrating and even self-doubt. This is a temporary and normal part of the healing period. Here are some suggestions for making it easier.



- ▽ Put your self-care plan from page 24 into action
- ▽ Make lists of things you love and reflect on how you can experience more of what you love while you heal from surgery (eg. lists of activities that bring you joy, ways that you connect with others, ways that you show yourself love, foods you love to eat, smells that calm & refresh you, sounds that inspire you, textures that you love to feel on your skin)
- ▽ Write letters expressing thanks to people who helped you during surgery
- ▽ Keep a journal



## 4. Mindfully return to usual activities

Ask your surgeon when you can resume your usual activities. Common recommendations are listed in Trans Care BC's [website](#), including some information about sexual activities and kink, but if there are any differences, you should follow the advice of your surgeon.

Exploring your body after surgery can happen in stages. Around eight weeks after surgery, you may find it helpful to practice touching yourself to start learning what kinds of touch you enjoy.

### **Create your space:**

Create a distraction-free space – put your phone on 'Do-Not-Disturb' and get comfortable. You can dim lights, light candles or use other rituals to help you feel grounded and relaxed.

### **Start with mindful touch:**

You can start with whatever kind of touch feels most comfortable for you. This might include gently placing a hand over the vulva to cup it, or running a finger along the skin. You can explore touching the creases of your thighs, mons, the area above your clitoris and along the length of each labia.

### **Experience different sensations:**

You can also experiment with how your body responds to different pressures and textures (like fabrics made of silk, cotton, wool or velvet). In this exercise, take time to feel the shape, texture, and temperature of your body. Pay attention to whether touch, pressure or texture feels neutral, pleasurable, tingly, uncomfortable, hypersensitive or perhaps a bit numb. These sensations may change over time as your body heals, as the swelling decreases and your nerves regenerate. If you notice the area feels hypersensitive, gentle pressure/touch is important so the nerves can become used to sensation again.

**Remember:** your sensory nerves can take 12-18 months to heal. Take this time to continue learning about your body.

## Explore the muscles in your pelvic floor:

Practice how to find, contract and relax your pelvic floor muscles:

- ▽ Inhale and let your muscles relax- it might help to picture your sitbones gently moving apart as the muscle relax
- ▽ Exhale and gently squeezing the muscles in your pelvic floor- it might help to picture your sitbones moving a little closer together as the muscles engage
- ▽ Inhale and let your muscles relax

You may find it helpful to listen to Dustienne's [guided mindfulness activity for dilation](#) on the YourPaceYoga website. If you are not dilating, or if you have had Vulvoplasty surgery, you can simply ignore the instructions specific to dilating.

# surgeon recommendations

Think of activities that you would like to ask your surgeon about. Here is a list of suggestions:

**Going to work**

**Driving a car**

**Riding a bike**

**Swimming**

**Participating in a sweat**

**Having a sauna**

**Lifting more than 10 pounds**

**Exercising**

**Sexual activity**

**Rituals and ceremonies**

**Dancing**

**Other activities:**

As you return to regular activities, you will find yourself needing to plan your day around your dilation schedule. It can be helpful to ease back into your activities and keep them short.

Check out this personal and **educational comic** about dilating by Naomi Rubin: [www.ohjoysexttoy.com/dilating-after-by-naomi-rubin/](http://www.ohjoysexttoy.com/dilating-after-by-naomi-rubin/)

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