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Top Surgery Care Guide
Originally Written Summer 2015
Revised 2020 and 2021

This guide is intended for trans individuals and anyone in their community who would be doing immediate aftercare for top surgery.

I had top surgery (double-incision) on June 30, 2015 with Dr. Melissa Johnson in Springfield, MA. I then recovered at home in Vermont with my mom as my primary caretaker. This document was originally written in 2015, in the weeks leading up to, and the month after, surgery. Since then, I have edited it to include additional details and clarification.

Because it was originally written in the present tense, and then edited a couple times, the tense jumps around between present and past tense. I have edited some of the language to my current writing style, but there are parts that I kept as-they-were from 2015.

5+ Years In:

Getting top surgery remains one of the best life-changing decisions I have made. I remember a few days after top surgery, when I was watching TV on the couch. I was so confused that my chest hurt, because my body felt so right that I actually forgot that I had just had surgery. Even as my gender identity and expression has evolved, I continue to feel so at home in my body.

I have since had another gender-and-reproductive connected surgery. I am not currently making that experience and care guide public, but I am more than happy to share it with individual trans folks who request it! A lot of the general top surgery tips & tricks translated over to that surgery as well.

Top Surgery Tips & Tricks:

Here are some of the tips I picked up from top surgery and the first week of recovery that I haven't really seen in the common knowledge sphere. Some of them are bits of information that I found once and haven't been able to source since. This is meant as a supplement to other commonly found information about surgical recovery.

***Get plastic retainers if you have body jewelry/finicky piercings.** You can't leave any metal piercings in because it can conduct the electricity of the machines and leave a burn. I sourced clear plastic retainers for my industrial, nose, cartilage, and 14 and 16g piercings. If you search "plastic retainer jewelry" you can find a lot of options. I changed some of them myself, and for the nose and industrial I just stopped by my local tattoo and piercing parlor and had them change the jewelry – this is typically at no cost to you, but I always tip for their time. At the hospital, you will need to explain to most of the nurses that the jewelry is plastic (possibly multiple times), but as long as you check in with your surgeon ahead of time and let them know, I've never had a problem (and this was true at a different hospital and other surgery as well).

***A wedge pillow will be your best friend.** I found mine online for about \$30, with dimensions of 23x24x12. This gave me two angles - an upright for when I was sitting/awake/doing things, and the other angle for when I was sleeping. Having propped myself up on pillows when I was sick in the past, having this wedge pillow greatly reduced my back muscle pain/aches from the angle, and basically eliminated any neck muscle pain that can develop.

***Get stool softeners with a laxative component** Basically, I bought the stool softener that didn't have a laxative component, and it was utterly useless in the face of narcotic constipation. There are dual pills - get those. Your surgeon might also prescribe one or give a brand recommendation.

***On dry shampoo:** Since I never use dry shampoo in my day-to-day life, I threw mine out at the beginning of the summer. Don't do that. Five-days post-surgery with nary a shower in sight, I severely regretted that decision. I've used baby powder in the past, which doesn't work super-well for my haircut. I had a body dusting powder from Lush that worked well as an alternative.

***2x2" and 4x4" gauze** I'd gotten a variety of gauze dressings pre-surgery, but these are the two sizes I ended up using and needing post-surgery (this is a bit more specific to Dr. Johnson and her aftercare instructions). I used the 4x4 to cover the steristrips and yellow nipple poofs (literally have no clue what these are called?) for the first week, and then used the 2x2 to cover my nipples and drain holes. I got some rolled gauze, which was useless for my recovery. My surgeon also recommended **maxi pads** for some additional coverage for the incisions, which worked really well once I ran out of the hospital materials. (What I got from the hospital lasted the first four days, and then I had enough with the random stuff I bought for the next two days. And it seems like I will just have to get one more package of 2x2 for the rest of aftercare ***this was accurate – I didn't need to buy further supplies after that point. However, I had an uncomplicated healing process, so you might need more supplies depending on your body.**)

***Hypoallergenic paper tape** My skin gets irritated from the adhesive of bandages and medical tape - instead of normal paper tape, I paid \$1 more and got the hypoallergenic, sensitive skin paper tape, since I will be using it for two weeks. Even the hypoallergenic paper tape began to irritate my skin a little at the end, but it was manageable.

***Get the fancy silicone scar gel or strips** It's worth it, you're worth it. Top surgery is an investment, and it didn't make sense to me to buy a less-expensive and less-effective scar cream after all that. I went with NewGel+E silicone scar gel, which was what my surgeon said was best. I definitely think it helped.

***Something ginger** I love the Ginger People's ginger chews, but anything would work - in my experience, the stronger the ginger taste, the better. It can help with nausea - from anesthesia, from car rides, from the medication; anxiety; and breath. I also had throat drops / lollipops for the first couple of days post-anesthesia to help with the sore throat that often follows anesthesia.

***If you are prone to nausea:** In addition to ginger (and making sure your anesthesiologist adds an anti-nausea to your anesthesia), I have Sea Bands for when I am on longer car rides and plane rides. They are found by Dramamine and similar nausea meds at most pharmacies, and are

used for seasickness, motion sickness, pregnancy sickness. Either the brand or generic is the same thing – I was glad I had these for the 4-hour ride home.

***Think about food** I was living at home with my mom when I had top surgery, so I didn't need to worry about buying food or preparing food. Popsicles and Italian ice were my go-to snacks, I made sure to have Gatorade on hand as well. Think about the types of food you like to eat when you're sick, and stock up on those. Anesthesia does a number on your body, even when there are no complications. If friends and family want to lend material support, GrubHub or other food-delivery gift-cards would be a good option if you are in an urban area, or if you are in a more rural setting, talking with a few folk ahead of time about helping to prepare food to drop off.

***If you have a comfort object (like a blanket or stuffed animal) bring that with you if you are staying overnight at the hospital.** It made sleeping so much easier.

***It was hard to not be in queer community during this recovery process. Be intentional about who will be taking care of you, and who you will be seeing / hanging out with / seeking support from.**

Top Surgery Emotional Challenges:

Here are some of the emotional things I personally struggled with after top surgery/during recovery, as a non-binary human with mental illness (depression/anxiety/food stuff).

***Gender and clothing** I dress in a way that makes me feel okay in my gender and my body. Recovery was a full week where I couldn't embody my gender through my clothing - instead, I was wearing basketball shorts and short-sleeve button-ups (which were admittedly great patterns, but the amusement wore off after a few hours). This paired with general after-surgery grossness and sweat made for a few days where my dysphoria and discomfort was at the same level as it was pre-top surgery, since my clothing and gender expression was so limited, and I was still binding, as you need to post-surgery. The first day I went out (day after the drains came out) was so good and needed - I had enough mobility to lace up my boots, and I managed to get a t-shirt on.

I changed out all of the retainer piercings (that I could), as soon as I could post-surgery. It took a little bit longer to get into town to get my nose and industrial switched out, but once I did, everything felt A LOT better. I present very intentionally, and my piercings are a part of that - the plastic felt incongruous to that. It was a small thing, switching back to metal, but helped a ton while I was still mostly in recovery clothes.

***Anxiety** I have anxiety. Recently, my anxiety has been more prevalent than my depression. Sometimes, the physical realities of binding makes my anxiety worse. Needing to bind 24/7 for the first month post-surgery made my anxiety flare *a lot*. I also didn't emotionally/mentally prepare myself for the healing stages of my nipples - it is an anxious habit to pick at scabs, so resisting the urge to do that has been a challenge. The first two weeks of sleeping on my back also spiked my anxiety, as I was not fully comfortable, and had difficulties falling asleep, even with

my anti-anxiety meds. Basically, my emotional vulnerability manifested in anxiety, and was still present immediately after surgery, especially with the binding.

***Weight and food things** I have dealt with some less-than-good eating patterns since the beginning of high school, related to weight, body image, and gender. Some of this flared up at the beginning of the summer prior to surgery. I had hoped that since top surgery would help me feel comfier in my body, that it might subside a bit. I have been able to eat normally because I know that my body is healing/recovering. I also made the mistake of weighing myself a week after surgery. If you have ever struggled with disordered eating **please try to avoid weighing yourself for a while**. Your body is swollen from major surgery, things are still healing and settling, and you need food to heal.

***Body image** Apparently I have pectorals? Which I thought for a bit was extra tissue that had been left, and it freaked me out because my chest still looked too curvy. But it is muscles/swelling. Who knew? I also missed being able to lift things – I did theater tech, and was always in working shape. My strength and stamina decreased immediately after surgery, and that was a point of stress.

***Itchyyyyyy** Everything itches. The binder itches. The gauze itches. My nipples itch. My incisions itch. THE TAPE ITCHES (hypoallergenic helped some but still caused irritation since I was using it for 2+ weeks in the same spots. It would've been so much worse with regular medical tape). Band-aids itch. My inability to do anything about all the itchy-ness plays right into my anxiety. It is also summer aka sweaty aka itchy, so that doesn't help any.

The takeaway of these struggles:** *I wish that I had more of my queer community in person surrounding me during this process* - at least I would be able to process/decompress with them. It was hard to just be at home, with my mom, and only seeing one of my close friends in the immediate healing stages. I couldn't wait to stop having to use the paper tape, and I couldn't wait to stop binding ***for good. Both of those milestones helped reduce my anxiety. I had also worked with my therapist to figure out what is typical anxiety around surgery and recovery, and what is specific to my baseline anxiety.

Benadryl did nothing for the itchy.

Dr. Melissa Johnson Review:

Dr. Johnson is less well-known as a top surgeon, but if you are in the northeast, she could be a great option. She is at Pioneer Valley Plastic Surgery in Springfield, MA. [Still true in 2021]

***Scheduling** She is busier in the summer, so from when I called to my original consult was about a month and a half. However, you can ask to be put on a cancellation list. This resulted in me getting a call the afternoon before a slot that had just opened - luckily I was able to make that work, transportation-wise.

For scheduling the surgery itself, this was complicated by two factors: the fact that Dr. Johnson is gone for a few weeks in July for vacation, and the fact that I had a day that I need to be abroad, giving a pretty small scheduling window. Irene, one of Dr. Johnson's assistants, was AMAZING in

really working to get me a surgery date this summer. She was dedicated to helping me get this done before I go abroad, and was able to find an opening at the hospital. Dr. Johnson has an office, but operates out of a different hospital. Because of her work, she was able to schedule me a week and a half after the consult (typical wait time is a month).

I was able to accommodate this compressed timeline, and because I had been thinking about this for years, I was comfortable moving quickly.

***Paperwork** Dr. Johnson requires a top surgery letter from a therapist. Mine clearly stated that I was genderqueer, and that this is a next step I've been thinking about, and since I'd been seeing my therapist long enough (time frame depends on if you are using insurance or out-of-pocket), that was the only documentation she required.

***Financing** She is listed under most insurances, my plan just had an exception for all gender-related things, so I couldn't put that through. There's a chance I could've fought this harder, but I was hitting too many dead-ends with my insurance company, so I paid out-of-pocket with a personal loan, cosigned by my dad, with a 5-year term. I was able to do this because I didn't have student loans at the time, and no other outstanding debt. Additionally, my GoFundMe covered about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the cost.

There is a consultation fee if you pay out of pocket that is later deducted from the surgery cost if you go with her. She is associated with Care Credit, and took credit card over the phone.

Again, because I was such a compressed timeline (top surgery a week and a half after the consult), my situation was a bit different - normally there is a 1000 fee to book the surgical slot, and then paid in full three weeks before. With the exceptional timeline, the office was really willing to work with me as I put a loan through - the day after I was called with the date (they put a soft hold on it), I paid 1600 of the total cost (Friday) to reserve, and then the following Tuesday morning I paid the rest when my loan went through.

***Communication** Pioneer Valley Plastic Surgery has an email that they answer (typically) within two-three hours, and a phone number at their office. They also sent pre-surgery instructions to my house in addition to the handouts I got at my consult.

Baystate Hospital was also in constant communication - I talked to the anesthesiology team for a pre-op screening, and then the intake folks called me three days before to check me in, and also called the day before to confirm.

The day after surgery Irene called to check in and make sure there were no complications.

***Name/pronoun stuff** The office really made sure to use my name, and called the hospital to change my records there once my legal name change went through (all of this was happening at the same time). In the hospital, the whiteboard with all the nurse info on it also had a "please call me" section, if your name was different than the legal info on your chart - the other person in my room was also having top surgery done, and from what I heard, no one messed up their name.

***The hospital** Again, I had nothing but a good experience. The nurse team was really on point - I didn't feel the IV needle go in, I felt really comfortable with the whole team - they were laid-back but professional and efficient, and really made me feel at ease. They also explained all of the steps in terms of what they were doing, which painkillers I was getting, how the anesthesia would work, what the recovery room would be, when my mom would be brought back in, etc.

My mom was back with me in the pre-op room, where I changed, was given a painkiller, and IV for fluids. Dr. Johnson came in and drew on my chest, and then the anesthesiology team came in, I peed one last time (she doesn't have a catheter put in), was given a painkiller/relaxation cocktail, gave my mom a hug, and was then rolled into the operating room. There, I remember, I got another sedative, was moved onto the table, had these awesome massaging leg things put on, given oxygen, and then the next thing I remember is slowly (and calmly) waking up in the post-op recovery room. There, they changed the dressings and made sure everything was okay, brought my mom in, and made sure I was feeling okay. Once I was pretty awake / cleared, I was wheeled to the daily wing of the hospital. Dr. Johnson likes having folks stay overnight if they are from further away, and the cost is included in her website-quoted cost. I was in a shared room with another person getting top surgery done, with a curtain in-between. The nurse made sure to call immediately so that I would be able to get dinner.

The nurses were really attentive, and I never felt like I was being a pain (I needed my painkiller on a pretty regular schedule, had to be detached from the leg massagers to pee, my IV ran out, I needed one of my anti-anxiety meds to sleep, and one of the drains got clogged with a clot) so I wasn't the most need-free patient, but I am also super grateful for the help from the nurses so I tried to be appreciative and not obnoxious even when I was panicky or in pain.

Midway through the night I was cleared to pee on my own (when my IV ran out / the massagers were taken off). That was a great feeling, although I missed the leg massagers. I feel like I slept as well as I could given the circumstances, and I woke up feeling decently well-rested. All the nurses I had knew what the procedure was, and why folks get it, and were really knowledgeable and respectful.

(I also brought my comfort blanket from home and my roommate brought a stuffed animal from home and these comfort items helped so much)

***Dr. Johnson herself** She was very efficient, but also was willing to take time to explain everything. She had all of the reconstruction certifications for me to feel really comfortable going with her. My mom works in healthcare, and she also had a high opinion of Dr. Johnson and how the consultation went.

Dr. Johnson's website is extremely detailed on the different types of top surgery she does, and has before and after pictures.

In the hospital she took the time to make sure the marks were even, so that I would get good results, and came out to my mom afterwards to check in / let her know that it went well.

***Post-op appointment** My post-op appointment only lasted about a half hour - they got me in right away, got the nipple poofs off, drains out, confirmed a few times that it looked like it was healing really well, and gave detailed aftercare instructions.

Additionally, they made sure to ask how my hospital experience was, as they value that folks have a good experience there in addition to their own office. Irene also made sure to pop in and say hi! Again, since they communicate well, I know (and am comfortable) reaching out if I have any more questions. I later needed to reach out to their office to get a letter confirming the surgery for legal documentation / gender change stuff, and they were super responsive and prompt to get that to me!

***Results** I am really happy with them. The scars are straight, not overly curved (one of the reasons I liked the results Dr. Johnson posted was that the scarring is straighter than some other surgeons do). It looks like my nipples aren't aligned, but numerically from my collarbone they are - how I carry myself currently just tilts them a bit, so it isn't anything that was surgical. And also it's only a week and a half post-op. Edit: 5 years in and I don't notice this at all.

But I don't seem to be too swollen, and all of the aftercare is going as instructed.

I definitely could've done more with massaging the scars afterwards, but they continue to fade overtime. I have had no complications at all, and am completely happy with my results and experience.

***Overall I am glad that I went with Dr. Johnson** - she was close for my region, cost was competitive, I was comfortable and confident every step of the way, and I am so pleased with the results. If you have any questions that I didn't answer here, feel free to reach out!