In 1963, Women’s College Hospital was the first hospital in Canada to use mammography as a routine diagnostic tool. In 1977, the Henrietta Banting Breast Centre was established to provide management of breast disease for women.

The Women’s College Hospital breast program encompasses breast cancer prevention, early detection, diagnosis, treatment and care, and research in breast disease and public and professional education. We are committed to a philosophy of integrated, interdisciplinary, timely and comprehensive programs and services.
What is a mastectomy?
A mastectomy is an operation that removes all of the breast tissue including the nipple. No muscles are removed. Your lymph nodes may be removed at the same time.

What will the area look like after surgery?
You will have a scar across your chest wall and the area will be flat. You may be more aware of the tissue at the side of your chest, around your armpit and over your stomach after your breast has been removed. This is normal.

What happens during your surgery?
After you have been put to sleep, a cut (incision) is made and the whole breast, including the nipple, is removed. All of the breast tissue is sent to the lab to be examined very carefully by the pathologist. The area is then closed with absorbable stitches. One or two drainage tubes are put in place to drain the fluid from the area. Skin tapes (steri-strips) are usually applied over the area and a dry sterile dressing is placed on top.

What happens after your surgery?
You will be taken to the recovery room after your operation is finished. When you are awake you will be taken to your room where you will rest overnight. You will go home with the drain in place. Instructions on how to care for your drain will be explained to you in the pre-admission department, and your nurse will review the instructions with you before you go home. A referral will be made for a home care nurse. A request will be made for the nurse to visit while the drain is in. The amount of recovery time needed varies from one person to next.

After your operation you may:
• Have numbness, tingling or pain in your chest area, shoulder or arm. If you have pain, take the pain medication prescribed for you as needed. If you were not given a prescription for pain medication, you can take a mild analgesic such as Tylenol Extra Strength or Advil. Some women experience a pain or sensation in the breast that has been removed, known as a “phantom” pain.
• Have bruising around the incision.

What care does my incision need?
Your home care nurse will change the dressing around the drain when they visit. The mastectomy site may be left uncovered after 48 hours. You should remove the steri-strips 10 days after your operation if they have not already peeled off. Do not apply any lotions, creams or scar therapy to the incision.

What can I do after my operation?
• Avoid any activity that involves lifting, pushing or pulling for four to six (4-6) weeks (over 10 pounds is considered heavy).
• Continue with the exercises given to you by the physiotherapist or occupational therapist until full use of your arm has returned.
• Be sure to follow the correct exercises while the drain is in place and add the others when the drain is removed. The exercises are an important part of your recovery. They will prevent the muscles in your arm or shoulder from becoming “frozen” or stiff. The exercises may cause some discomfort. Taking your pain medication 30 minutes before you do your exercises will help.
• Sleep on the opposite side to avoid fluid collecting around the wound.
• Discuss returning to work and your ability to drive your vehicle with your surgeon.
• The amount of recovery time needed varies from one person to next.

When can I bathe?
You can shower 48 hours after your operation if your surgeon instructs you to do so. If you have a drain, you may tub bath from the waist down, but no soaking of the incision drain site.

When will I see my doctor next?
An appointment will be made for you to see your surgeon two to three (2-3) weeks after your operation. She/he will check your wound and make sure it is healing well. The pathology results will be available and the surgeon will discuss these with you. Any further treatment options will also be discussed. You will also be given information regarding any other specialist that you may need to see. If the surgeon recommends that you see a medical or radiation oncologist, we will make the referral and you will be called with the appointment date and time.

Notify your doctor sooner if you experience any of the following:
• unusual drainage of fluid or bleeding from the incision
• if your incision becomes red, swollen or tender to touch
• if your temperature is 38 C(100.4 F) or higher for 24 hours

If you are unable to reach your doctor or the doctor covering, go to the emergency department at the hospital closest to your home.

Sometimes after an operation like this, fluid may collect around the wound. You may see the swelling and sometimes “hear” the fluid. This is not unusual. If the area becomes hard and swollen, call your doctor or nurse and make an appointment. Although this is not an urgent matter, some of the fluid can be drained which can make you more comfortable.

Breast prosthesis
A permanent prosthesis is usually not ordered until the mastectomy incision is well healed, and this may take six to 12 weeks after your operation. A temporary prosthesis, which is very light, can be used in your bra until you are ready for the permanent prosthesis. It is also recommended that you visit a specially trained vendor that sells mastectomy supplies to see what is available for the post-op period, for swimming, for night wear and for a permanent prosthesis.

A temporary prosthesis can be obtained by contacting the Canadian Cancer Society – Reach to Recovery at 1-800-263-6750.

The Government of Ontario covers a portion of the cost of external breast prostheses. Information and an application can be found at: www.health.gov.on.ca or by calling:

Toronto: 416-327-8804
Toll-free: 1-800-268-6021
TDD (for the deaf): 1-800-387-5559