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Prostheses (Prosthetics)

In cancer care, implants and prostheses (also known as prosthetics) play a crucial role in helping people recover and maintain their quality of life.

- [What is a prosthesis?](#)
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What is a prosthesis?

A **prosthesis** is the general term for a device, implant, or other item that replaces a body part or function. This can also include other items like ostomy supplies, catheters, and even wigs.

Other terms to know:

- The plural of prosthesis is **prostheses**.
- You might also hear these called **prosthetics**.
- Prostheses that are surgically placed inside the body are known as **implants**.

Why do some people with cancer get a prosthesis?

Sometimes, a person gets a prosthesis because a part of their body is removed to treat or prevent cancer. A person might also get a prosthesis when a body part is still there

but doesn't look or function the same way as it did before.

Surgeries for cancer treatment

Many types of cancer surgery require removing one or more parts of the body because cancer is there. Some examples include:

- Mastectomy (one or both breasts)
- Prostatectomy (all or part of the prostate)
- Laryngectomy (all or part of the larynx — voice box)

Surgeries for cancer prevention

Some people choose to proactively have a body part removed to prevent cancer from developing. For example, someone who is very high risk for breast cancer might choose to have a **prophylactic double mastectomy** (to preventatively remove both breasts).

Certain side effects of cancer treatment

Side effects like hair loss (alopecia) can be especially traumatic for many people. Wigs and other hair pieces are sometimes called **cranial prostheses**.

People often choose to get prostheses to help them function better, physically or emotionally. Many people find that a good prosthesis helps with both.

Does insurance cover prosthetics for cancer?

Many insurance plans cover some or all of the cost of a prosthesis.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) requires all small group insurance plans to cover essential benefits, including prosthetics. But in reality, insurance coverage varies depending on what insurance plan you have and what prostheses you need.

If and **how much** of the cost is actually covered often depends on whether or not the prosthesis is considered “medically necessary.” There isn't a standard definition of what is medically necessary, so coverage varies among insurance providers.

Medicare Part B

Most prosthetics that replace a body part or function are covered under Medicare Part B as Durable Medical Equipment (DME). However, if they aren't considered medically necessary, they might not be covered. (For example, Medicare doesn't consider cranial prostheses (wigs) for hair loss to be medically necessary.)

Prostheses related to a mastectomy

Learn more about [managing insurance and cancer-related expenses](#)⁴.

Communicate with a prosthetist

If you're working with a prosthetist, give them as much information as possible about your insurance coverage. They might be able to recommend certain prosthetics that meet your needs while keeping your out-of-pocket-costs as low as possible.

[Questions about health insurance?](#)⁵

Contact the ACS cancer helpline to get answers and information.

Types of prostheses

There are many different types of prostheses. Some are worn on the outside of the body and can be put on and taken off (such as a breast form or leg prosthetic). Others are internal and often placed surgically (such as implants in the breast or penis).

Breast implants and prostheses

Breast implants are placed inside your body, with surgery. A **breast prosthesis** (or breast form) is worn outside your body.

Whether you use a breast prosthesis or an implant will depend on the type of breast surgery you have, other cancer treatments you might need, the risks and benefits of each, and your own personal preferences.

Breast implants

- Your surgeon might place your implant during the initial [surgery to remove your breast cancer](#)⁶. Or it might be placed during a separate surgery.
- Breast implants come in different shapes and sizes. They are made of either silicone gel or saline water. Many people prefer silicone implants because they feel softer and more natural.

Breast prostheses

A breast prosthesis (or breast form) is placed and worn inside a bra or other support garment. They are often made of silicone, foam, or cotton. Here are some tips when choosing and getting fitted for a breast prosthesis:

- If you've had a smaller portion of your breast tissue removed, small prostheses (equalizers) are also available.
- Nipple prostheses can be added during surgery when the nipple can't be saved. Breast forms are available with and without nipples.
- Wear a fitted top when you shop for a prosthesis so you can see how it looks when you move.
- Try different options. Prostheses vary in shape, weight, and consistency. Ask about custom options if needed.

Learn more:

- [Surgery for Nasal Cavity and Paranasal Sinus Cancers](#)⁹
- [Surgery for Oral Cavity and Oropharyngeal Cancers](#)¹⁰.

Ocular (eye) prostheses and implants

Certain types of cancer require removing the eye (called **enucleation**). This is often part of cancer treatment for ocular (eye) cancers, such as ocular [melanoma](#)¹¹, ocular lymphoma, and [retinoblastoma](#)¹². In these cases, you might be offered an artificial eye (ocular prosthesis or implant).

Artificial eyes are usually made of silicone or hydroxyapatite (a bone-like material). An **ocularist** is a doctor who specializes in eye prostheses. They work with you and your cancer care team to find the best option. Prosthetics can be custom-made to match your eye size and color.

Prosthetic techniques have come a long way. It's often difficult or impossible to tell a prosthetic apart from a natural eye. Certain surgeries allow the surgeon to attach the prosthetic eye to your eye muscles, so it even moves the same way as your natural eye did.

Learn more:

- [Surgery for Eye Cancer](#)¹³
- [Surgery for Retinoblastoma](#)¹⁴.

Limb (leg, arm, hand, foot) prostheses

Physical and activity limits are the most significant changes most people deal with after amputation (surgery to remove part or all of a limb). Before surgery that will affect a limb (arm, leg, foot, or hand), ask about prosthesis options, risks, benefits, and how your prosthesis will be fitted.

- Sometimes a bone implant is attached to an external prosthesis.
- Targeted muscle reinnervation (TMR) might also be used. This helps make the prosthesis more stable and easier to control.
- Depending on the limb affected and how much needs to be removed, a temporary limb prosthesis might be fitted during the first surgery and a permanent prosthesis can be fitted after you are stronger.

- Be sure you know how to care for the surgical site and the prosthesis.

Learn more: [Amputee Coalition](#)¹⁵ has local resources and information about limb prostheses.

Penile implants and prostheses

You might choose to get a penile implant (internal) or use a penile prosthesis (external) after surgery for penile or prostate cancer, or if other cancers or cancer treatments affect your ability to have an erection.

- Penile prostheses are external and worn outside the body. They are often attached with a strap.
- Penile implants are internal. They are placed after recovery from cancer surgery.
- You might want to discuss the possibility of a prosthesis or implant with your partner.
- Counseling sessions could help with making a decision.
- Different types, sizes, and shapes of penile prostheses and implants are available.
- Talk to your cancer care team and your partner about your options and what type is best for you.
- Talk to your insurance company about coverage.

Learn more: [Sexuality for the Man With Cancer](#)¹⁶.

Testicular implants

A testicular implant can be placed in your scrotum. This is done either during surgery to remove the testicle with cancer (orchiectomy), or in a separate surgery. Before surgery, talk to your cancer care team about whether you want a testicular implant.

Learn more: [Sexuality for the Man With Cancer](#)¹⁷

Living with a prosthesis

Depending on the type of prosthesis, you might have follow-up care and appointments. It's important to tell your health care team how you're doing with your prosthesis. This includes any problems, concerns, or questions you might have.

Sometimes rehabilitation (rehab) or therapy is recommended for people with cancer

who are learning to live with a new prosthesis. Rehab and therapy can improve your function, comfort, and quality of life. Examples are physical therapy, occupational therapy, or speech therapy.

Cancer rehab (or rehabilitation) is another example.

Cancer rehab is a supportive health care program that can help if you have physical or mental side effects caused by cancer or cancer treatment. This includes learning how to do daily activities with your new prosthesis. It also includes learning how to cope with both the physical and emotional effects of living with a prosthesis.

Learn more about [cancer rehab](#)¹⁸.

[Cancer Survivors Network](#)

An online community where people with cancer, survivors, and caregivers can connect with others 24/7.

[Cancer Help](#)¹⁹

Contact the ACS cancer helpline to get answers and information

[MHA - Mental Health America](#)

Find a counselor or mental health provider.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/financial-insurance-matters/health-insurance-laws/womens-health-and-cancer-rights-act.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer/risk-and-prevention/preventive-surgery-to-reduce-breast-cancer-risk.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/financial-insurance-matters/managing-health-insurance/getting-medical-pre-approval-or-prior-authorization.html
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6. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/breast-cancer/treatment/surgery-for-breast-cancer.html
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8. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/hair-skin-nails/hair-loss.html
9. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/nasal-cavity-and-paranasal-sinus-cancer/treating/surgery.html
10. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/oral-cavity-and-oropharyngeal-cancer/treating/surgery.html
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18. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/be-healthy-after-treatment/what-to-expect-from-cancer-rehabilitation.html
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