



CBCN Advocacy Guide: Surgery Delays



If you were recently diagnosed with breast cancer, you are probably facing a decision about **breast cancer surgery**. Breast cancer surgery is an effective part of treatment because it removes the cancerous tumour from the breast. There are two main types of breast cancer surgery: a lumpectomy, which removes only the tumour and some surrounding tissue, and a mastectomy, which removes the entire breast. Most people with breast cancer will need surgery, and it is typically done early in treatment. The best time for you to receive surgery depends on your **prognosis**, so the **timing** of surgery is important. In the rest of this guide, you will learn more about normal wait times for breast cancer surgery, and what causes delays. You will also learn how to advocate if you are met with a delay, and how to advocate for general surgery delays.

How long am I supposed to wait?

If you need breast cancer surgery, the **stage** and **subtype** determine when surgery should happen, and how long you should wait. This means it is normal for some people to wait longer than others for surgery. Everyone will have a unique wait time, for unique reasons. For example, some people will receive **neo-adjuvant therapy** before surgery, so their surgery will happen later. Some waiting is normal, so it's important to ask your doctor how long you can expect to wait for surgery. Asking your healthcare team is the best way to know what to expect for your unique situation.

In addition to asking your health care team, we have **pan-Canadian standards** on breast cancer surgery. Based on these standards, we know the following about what to expect with respect to breast cancer surgery wait times. After you are diagnosed with breast cancer, your first consultation with a **specialist** should take place **within two weeks**. Following this, for those who will receive surgery as their first treatment, 90% should receive surgery **within 4 weeks** of their consultation. For some, this may seem like a long time to wait for surgery. For others, this may seem fast. That is why we recommend speaking with your healthcare team about what is an appropriate wait time for your unique situation.

*Your first consultation with a specialist is a good time to ask how long you will wait to receive surgery. To learn more about treatment plans, check out CBCN's **PatientPath**. To explore surgery options, visit CBCN's **SurgeryGuide**.*

What causes breast cancer surgery delays?

Based on the **pan-Canadian standards** mentioned previously, we can consider a delay as wait times that are longer than what is recommended by experts. If breast cancer surgery is delayed for too long, it can harm the person who is waiting. Research shows that each 4-week delay between diagnosis and surgery can **increase** the chances of dying from cancer by 6 – 8%. Unfortunately, we do not have pan-Canadian **data** about how long people are waiting for breast cancer surgery. We do know that one of the most common reasons for breast cancer surgery delays is the limited capacity of our healthcare system.

Between 2020 – 2021, many treatments were postponed or canceled as measures to lessen the spread of COVID-19. During this period, many healthcare workers, including nurses and doctors, left the workforce. As a result, in 2025 many hospitals and cancer centers are experiencing staffing shortages. Sadly, this means there are not always enough **nurses or operating rooms** to perform the breast cancer surgeries patients need. Healthcare worker shortage and not enough operating rooms are just some aspects contributing to long healthcare wait times.

To learn more about healthcare wait times, check out our blog post [here](#).

How to Advocate for Yourself if You Suspect a Delay

Facing a breast cancer diagnosis is difficult enough without the threat of delayed surgery. In addition to the potential harm of a delay, researchers warn that the emotional impact can be **stressful**. If you suspect that you are facing a delay, you may wish to advocate for an earlier surgery date. The following options may help you get an earlier surgery date, but unfortunately there is no guarantee.

Talk to your healthcare team about the delay. Your healthcare team is the best source of information about what may be causing the delay. If possible, work with your healthcare team to find a solution you are comfortable with. You can use this guide to inform your conversation.

Ask your health care team to place you on a waitlist or cancelation list. In most cases, you can ask to be placed on a waitlist or cancelation list. This means if someone else cancels, you may be offered an earlier surgery date. Depending on where you live, you can check wait times for breast cancer surgery online:

British Columbia

Saskatchewan

Ontario

Quebec

New Brunswick

Nova Scotia

Find out whether other hospitals have an earlier surgery date. You can also ask your care team whether another hospital can perform your surgery at an earlier date. This can include a hospital in your province or out of the province.

How to advocate for others who are faced with delays

It is unacceptable that people experiencing a breast cancer surgery delay have no guarantee they will be seen earlier. We must do more to reduce breast cancer surgery delays. Here are three things you can do to help transform our healthcare system for the better.

Share your story. Your experience matters. If you have overcome a surgery delay, your story can help others. Check out CBCN's [Digital Advocacy and Storytelling Toolkit](#) to learn more about how to share your story with the media. Sharing your experience about breast cancer surgery delays [with the media](#) can be an impactful way to bring awareness to this issue on a large scale.

Talk to your member of parliament (MP or MNA). Contact your member of parliament and ask what they are doing to end breast cancer surgery delays. Let them know the impact that lengthy healthcare delays are having on individuals and their families and how important it is for them to address this concerning issue. You can find your MP using your postal code [here](#).

Ask for breast cancer surgery benchmarks. Researchers don't know how long Canadians are waiting for breast cancer surgery because we don't have national [benchmarks](#). A benchmark is a national goal for how long someone should wait before surgery. Researchers use benchmarks to measure whether wait times are getting longer or shorter. Without them, researchers can't tell whether wait times for breast cancer surgery are improving or not. Contact your [Premier](#), [Provincial Minister of Health](#), or [Federal Deputy Minister of Health](#) and ask them for a commitment to pan-Canadian breast cancer surgery benchmarks.

Notes
