

## Going Abroad for Cosmetic Breast Surgery?

### **Who is this guide for?**

*This information is for anyone thinking about going abroad for cosmetic breast surgery.*

*Cosmetic tourism is on the rise, but while many travel abroad to try and save money, it is important to consider the full picture. If things go wrong, any potential cost savings made will be greatly outweighed by the financial and health consequences. You need to understand that this is a real risk and decide if this is the right choice for you.*

*Whilst there may be a lot of information online and virtual consultations are increasingly available, when it comes to cosmetic tourism it does not replace a face to face consultation with a surgeon.*

*Your surgeon will need to examine you and explain what can be achieved for you and what you might expect from surgery. It is important that you have a detailed discussion with your surgeon so that you are well informed prior to having any sort of surgery.*

### **Breast Surgery Consultation**

At your consultation you will be asked what is bothering you about your breasts and about your expectations from the surgery. It is important that you share all of your previous medical information with your surgeon.

You will be examined and measurements taken of your breasts. This may include taking photographs for your medical records. Some discussion will follow about what can be achieved with your breasts.

You should be told about the operation, the expected outcome and possible risks and complications. Here in the UK, you are given a 'cooling-off' period of at least 2 weeks before having surgery, and you should be offered a second consultation, before the operation. You should never feel rushed into surgery. All this is designed to help you make a well-informed decision. Your GP, family or friends may also help you in making the right decision.

If you are over 40 years, a mammogram (an X-ray of the breasts) is recommended before surgery to make sure there are no abnormalities in the breast tissue. The logistics and costs of this should be taken into account, particularly when considering having surgery abroad.



### **Why is there a 'cooling-off' period?**

It is essential that you are making the appropriate choice and understand all the implications of the surgery you are considering. The 'cooling off' period allows you adequate time to process all

the information provided with regards to surgery and whether the discussed plan and likely outcome fits in with your expectations. It is crucial that you do not feel rushed into surgery. If you are not offered a cooling-off period, or you are put under pressure to have a procedure, you should walk away.



## How can I check my surgeon's qualifications?

In the UK all surgeons are listed with the General Medical Council (GMC). You can check that a surgeon is on the register at [www.gmc-uk.org](http://www.gmc-uk.org); click the link 'Check a doctor's registration status', type in the surgeon's name and/or GMC number and their details will appear. Under 'Status' they should be listed as "Registered with a license to practise; this doctor is on the specialist register".

Cosmetic breast surgeons in the UK may also be registered with the Association of Breast Surgery (ABS), the British Association of Aesthetic Surgeons (BAAPS) and/or the British Association of Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons (BAPRAS). Surgeons who are members of these organisations will have a standard set of

recognised qualifications and will follow the guidance set by the General Medical Council. (Guidance for doctors who offer cosmetic interventions, GMC April 2016. [www.gmc-uk.org/guidance](http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance))

Other countries use different systems, and you may find similar associations abroad, but you will have to do your own research. It is perfectly reasonable to ask the surgeon about their experience and qualifications also. Regulations, qualifications and standards overseas are not the same as that of the UK. If you are travelling abroad, you should ask how the practice is regulated and for details of infection rates and back-up services if things go wrong during your operation or stay; for instance do they always have a doctor on hand? You should also ask what happens if you have an infection or complication a week or two after surgery.

In England all private cosmetic surgery hospitals and clinics are regulated by the Care Quality Commission, who ensure that standards of the facilities and care are high and inspected regularly. In the devolved nations, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, other regulatory bodies fulfill this function. Other countries do not necessarily have a similar licensing and inspection regime. Patients report that some clinics abroad are clean and of very high standard whilst others are not.

Many patients use internet search engines to look up doctors and services. You should bear in mind that information accessed in this fashion may be promotional in nature and this is particularly important when considering surgery abroad. Those listed may have paid for such a listing. A prominent listing is not a measure of service quality but rather a measure of marketing ability.

## Costs

The surgery you desire may appear to cost less abroad at face value, but it is important to consider the true impact of travelling for treatment. Cosmetic surgery abroad is often cheaper than in some parts of the UK, however should complications arise following the initial surgery, returning to see the surgeon could add significant costs and also involve time off from work. The cost of getting home if medical complications occur could be significant as holiday travel insurance does not usually cover this. You should also factor in any corrections or follow-up treatments that you may need, and whether you will have these done overseas (which will have additional travel and accommodation costs) or back at home. While many operations done abroad are

## Cosmetic tourism - it is not a holiday!

*Cosmetic surgery abroad is often labelled as a holiday package. This is very misleading and creates the wrong impression and you should be cautious of websites advertising cosmetic surgery as part of a holiday.*

*Cosmetic breast surgery is a serious medical procedure to your body and should not be considered lightly. Planning a holiday right after your surgery is unwise since it is unlikely that you will be able to carry out regular holiday activities, as this can increase the risk of things going wrong. You should not sunbathe, drink alcohol, go sightseeing, swim or do any water sports. After most surgery you would be advised to rest and just take gentle light exercise until your wound has healed. Of course, it is possible to plan a holiday before your operation, and plan several days of rest afterwards.*





uneventful, breast surgeons in the UK see a significant number of patients with complications and problems.

In the UK cosmetic surgery is heavily regulated, ultimately for your own protection. Such regulation is quite expensive for the surgeons and clinic owners. In addition, surgeons in the UK must have extensive malpractice indemnity or insurance in case something goes seriously wrong. This ensures that you receive the best possible care and treatment. Inevitably, the cost of this reassurance is reflected in the higher prices for your surgery. Cosmetic surgery is regulated differently in other countries and so standards of care may differ and the cost of regulation be less.

Seeing a breast surgeon at home allows you the luxury of time and additional consultations to gain confidence in your surgeon and the procedure before making your decision. If you are travelling abroad for surgery, you will often not see your surgeon or discuss treatment in much detail beforehand, or you may only meet a surgeon for the first time on the day of the procedure.

Follow-up care is an important part of surgical procedures. No treatment is without risk, and access to aftercare and advice may be harder to get if you have travelled abroad for your cosmetic breast surgery. While this aftercare is factored into the cost of the surgery in the UK, most clinics overseas provide limited or no aftercare once you are back in the UK, which allows them to reduce the cost of surgery. This should be considered when deciding on whether going abroad is actually better value for money.

## Complications

All operations are associated with risks. Complications can happen after cosmetic surgery whether your surgery

is carried out in the UK or abroad. Surgery is usually safe and successful, but some complications can be serious. It is important to weigh them up against the potential benefits of the surgery, particularly if you are going abroad.

If you have a complication after an operation in the UK, it is the surgeon's responsibility to provide you with any necessary aftercare and follow-up treatment. Overseas clinics may not provide follow-up treatment, or they may not provide it to the same standard as in the UK.

If something does go wrong, whether it is a complication or concerns about cosmetic outcome, then the surgeon is on hand to discuss it with you and decide how the problem can best be resolved. This reassurance cannot easily be provided when travelling abroad to have cosmetic surgery.

Any potential cost savings that might arise from travelling abroad should be balanced against this, and other considerations, such as the need to take time off work and the cost of possibly returning to the overseas clinic for corrections, should be taken into account.

If going abroad do ask your surgeon how possible complications will be addressed.

## What if something goes wrong? Will the NHS look after me?

The NHS will look after you in the event of a life-threatening complication, such as bleeding or severe infection, but any other problems will have to be covered by you if you have had cosmetic surgery abroad. There is an increasing number of patients turning to the NHS with problems following poor cosmetic surgery abroad. This is not funded by the NHS and you are likely to be refused

treatment for such problems as poor wound healing. You would have to return abroad to your clinic or pay for private treatment in the UK.

## Deep vein thrombosis/pulmonary embolism (DVT/PE)

This is a rare but serious complication of surgery and general anaesthesia, where a blood clot forms in the veins, (usually the legs) and can move to the lungs interfering with their usual function. You will be given anti-thrombotic stockings to wear to reduce this risk. Blood clots can start to form during the time of your operation.

After surgery; you should avoid dehydration, remain mobile and follow any other guidance given. If you experience sudden chest pain or breathlessness you need to seek emergency medical help as this is life-threatening.

The combination of both air travel and major surgery increases the risk of developing deep vein thrombosis or a pulmonary embolism. Flying shortly before or after an operation abroad combines these risks, particularly if your flight is a long one. It is recommended that you do not fly for seven days following breast surgery. You should specifically ask your surgeon about this before deciding to travel abroad for cosmetic breast surgery.

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## Summary

*It is important that you do your own research if you're thinking about having cosmetic surgery abroad. Yes, it can cost less than in the UK, but you need to weigh up potential savings against the potential risks. Moreover, safety standards may not be as high and aftercare can be an issue.*

*Finally, as well as having a clear understanding of the costs of the treatment (including hidden costs), make sure to be clear on both your travel insurance and medical insurance cover.*

*No surgery is risk-free and going abroad for cosmetic breast surgery is certainly not without real risks.*



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