

Top Surgery

What is Top Surgery?

Top surgery is a gender-affirming procedure that helps transgender, nonbinary, and gender-diverse folks feel more at home in their bodies. For trans masc folks, this usually means creating a flatter, more traditionally masculine chest (often called chest masculinization or chest contouring). For trans femme folks, this may involve breast augmentation using implants or fat transfer to create a more traditionally feminine chest.

Not all trans folks want surgery, and not everyone who does will feel the same way about it. Choosing not to pursue surgery doesn't make you any less trans. There's no one-size-fits-all transition path.

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Top Surgery Process

Step 1: Talk to a Provider

This step can feel frustrating, especially when providers still rely on outdated ideas about what "counts" as being trans. You may be expected to prove your readiness for surgery in ways that feel unnecessary or dehumanizing. This can show up as questions that feel invasive, irrelevant, or impossible to answer "correctly." These often act as informal tests, even if providers don't call them that.

That doesn't mean you owe anyone a perfect answer. You don't need to perform your gender in a certain way, meet arbitrary standards, or exaggerate your experience to be taken seriously. You deserve care that affirms who you are, not who someone else expects you to be. You might begin by speaking with a family doctor, nurse practitioner, psychiatrist, or someone at a sexual health or community clinic. What matters most is that they see you, respect you, and support you as you are.

If your provider doesn't understand trans care, it's not your job to educate them. You can ask them to consult [resources on gender-affirming care](#) or look for a provider with more experience in trans health. Many folks find more support in [community-based clinics](#) or [2SLGBTQIA+ health centres](#) than in traditional family practices. You deserve affirming care. It's okay to find someone else.

Step 2: Get a Referral Letter

To have top surgery covered by OHIP, you'll need a referral letter. This letter doesn't go directly to the surgeon, it's sent to the Ministry of Health for funding approval. While OHIP only needs one letter, your surgeon might ask for more like an intake questionnaire, a readiness form, or documentation of gender dysphoria. These requirements vary widely. Once you know who your surgeon will be, double-check what they require so you can avoid delays.

You don't need to be on hormones to get top surgery. However, some surgeons may require trans masc folks to be on testosterone for a certain period (often 1 year). For trans femme folks seeking breast augmentation, estrogen use may be encouraged for at least 1-2 years before surgery to allow for natural breast development, which can enhance results. Other surgeons don't require proof you've been on hormones. It's frustratingly inconsistent. If hormones are part of your path, make sure your provider sends the referral letter after that requirement is met, not before, or you might risk being denied coverage.

Many folks bring in a [printed sample referral letter](#) to make sure their provider includes all the necessary wording. It's totally okay to do this, especially if your provider is supportive but inexperienced.

This letter is often treated as a formality, but it can feel like a test, especially when the system expects you to prove your gender in specific ways. There is no single "right" way to be trans. You may be asked to explain your experience, but that doesn't mean you need to justify your identity or share trauma to access care. You're allowed to self-define, and you're allowed to ask for support in making this step as smooth as possible.

Step 3: Get OHIP Approval

Once the letter is submitted, some community-based clinics say that OHIP approval typically takes 3 to 6 months. However, in reality, the full process (from referral to surgery) often takes 1 to 1.5 years or longer. You'll receive written confirmation once OHIP approves your surgery, which you'll need before booking a surgical consult. You can call the Ministry of Health after a few weeks to confirm they've received your paperwork and check the status. Don't wait passively if it feels urgent.

Step 4: Choose a Surgeon

When you're ready to move forward, you'll need to choose a surgeon who feels like the right fit for you. Most folks who live in Ontario have top surgery within the province, where several surgeons offer OHIP-covered options. Some may involve out-of-pocket costs depending on the clinic and procedure. Other folks choose to go to GRS Montreal in Quebec, which is OHIP-covered and one of the few clinics that automatically includes chest contouring—a procedure for trans masc folks seeking a more traditionally masculine chest shape.

It's okay to ask questions about what's included what the wait times are like, and what kind of support they offer before and after surgery. This is your body, your care, and your comfort and you deserve to feel informed, respected, and supported every step of the way.

When researching surgeons or attending consults, it's okay to ask:

- Do you use drains? (Some folks, especially after masculinizing surgery, find recovery easier without them).
- What surgical techniques do you offer? (For example, double incision or keyhole for trans masc folks; implant types or placement for trans femme folks).
- How long is your waitlist?
- What does aftercare include? Do you offer post-op checkups, scar care, or help managing complications?
- Can I see [photos of healed results](#) from people with similar body types?

Getting Ready For Top Surgery

Getting ready for top surgery isn't just about supplies—it's about setting yourself up to feel as safe, supported, and cared for as possible.

- **Set up a gentle recovery space:** Neck pillows, body pillows, zip-up hoodies (especially helpful after masculinizing surgery), bendy straws, a lap tray, a donut pillow, and small snacks or drinks nearby can make a big difference. A grabber tool can also be very helpful when your movement is limited.
- **Move everyday essentials within easy reach.** After masculinizing surgery, you likely won't be able to lift your arms above shoulder height.
- **Bring a pillow for the car ride home** to soften the pressure from seatbelts and bumps.
- **Clean your space ahead of time** if you're able, and plan for meals, pet care, and anything else you won't want to stress about later.
- **Ask for support:** If it feels right, invite someone to stay with you, especially during the first few days. You don't have to do this alone.

After Top Surgery: What to Expect

Healing takes time, usually more than 2 weeks, so try to clear your schedule and give yourself space to truly rest if you're able to do so. Whether you've had a masculinizing or feminizing procedure, your body will need time, support, and patience. For trans masc folks, recovery may include fluid drainage, chest tightness, and limited arm movement. For trans femme folks, swelling, tenderness, and sensitivity around the implants are common. You might notice fluids, smells, or strange sensations during recovery. It can feel weird, but that doesn't always mean something's wrong. Stay ahead of the pain by taking medication as directed; this isn't the time to tough it out or wait until it really hurts.

Ask your provider ahead of time:

- When can I remove tape or bandages?
- What signs mean something isn't healing right?
- Can my support person reach you if I can't?
- If I have a question or concern about the surgery or possible complications, are you willing to coordinate with my family doctor or other care providers?

Once you're cleared to begin scar care, 100% silicone gel is often recommended, and gentle massage may help with healing. But always check what's safe for your specific surgery. Emotionally, recovery can bring up a lot. Healing isn't just physical. Whatever you're feeling is valid, and there's no "right" way to go through it.

What if You're Not Ready Yet? Or Don't Want Surgery?

You don't need surgery. You don't need HRT. You don't need to change your body to be trans. There's no finish line. No deadline. No checklist you have to follow. If you're questioning, unsure, or just not ready, that doesn't make you any less worthy of care, respect, or belonging. And that doesn't make you any less trans. This is your body. Your choice. Your timeline. You are enough, exactly as you are.



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