

Phalloplasty

The Comprehensive Gender Services Program (CGSP) uses the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care guidelines when referring you for care relating to gender dysphoria, including phalloplasty. The process described in this handout helps us to make sure that we follow the WPATH Standards of Care guidelines and provide safe and effective care.

What are the requirements for phalloplasty?

Phalloplasty is a surgery that creates a penis using skin taken from another part of the body. Often, it also includes the removal of the uterus, ovaries, and vagina.

- To have this surgery, you will need **1 or 2 support letters** from licensed mental health care providers that address the WPATH Standards of Care guidelines. The number of support letters you need depends on the requirements of your insurance provider.
- You will need to be using **hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for at least 12 consecutive months** (1 full year) before your surgery. Your support letters need to include the month and year that you started HRT. If you cannot or don't want to take HRT, your support letter will need to provide information on why HRT is not appropriate for you.
- You will need to have a **body mass index (BMI) of 40 or below**.
 - If your BMI is higher than 30, there are increased risks and complications (medical issues) with surgery and our surgeons will recommend weight loss before surgery for best results.
 - If your BMI is higher than 40, there are technical issues with creating the new penis that prevents our doctors from doing the

surgery. You should contact CGSP to be registered for our virtual information meeting (details about this meeting can be found later in this handout). You may also want to talk about possible weight loss programs to lower your BMI with your primary care provider. We will schedule your appointment with the surgeon once you are on your weight loss journey.

- Your surgeon will decide whether or not they will do the surgery based on your overall health, your BMI, and your anatomy (the way your body is shaped).
- If you are unsure of your current BMI, there are free BMI calculators available online that will determine your BMI based on your height and weight.
- If you need help finding a primary care provider or weight loss program, CGSP has a list of local resources.

How do I know if I need 1 or 2 support letters?

The following insurance providers have updated their policies based on the newest version of the WPATH Standards of Care. If your insurance is from any of the following insurance providers, you should only need to get **1 support letter** for phalloplasty:

- Aetna
- Blue Cross Blue Shield of MI (including Blue Care Network and Blue Cross Complete)
- Blue Cross Blue Shield of MN
- Blue Cross Blue Shield FEP
- Cigna
- Highmark BCBS
- Humana
- McLaren
- Medical Mutual of OH

- Meridian
- Priority Health

If your insurance is from any of the following insurance providers, you will still need **2 support letters**:

- Some out-of-state Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) providers (like Anthem BCBS, BCBS of MA, and Empire BCBS)
- Molina
- Paramount
- UnitedHealthcare

This list of insurance providers may be incomplete. CGSP will continue to update this list as we gather further information.

If your insurance provider is on the list of providers that only ask for 1 support letter, it is not a guarantee that you will only need 1 letter for your surgery to be approved and covered by your insurance plan. Similarly, if your insurance plan is not on either of these lists, it is not a guarantee that insurance coverage for your surgery will be denied. Individual insurance plans can change which procedures are covered, so we recommend that you contact your insurance provider or look at your insurance plan documents for information about what your personal plan can cover.

After your surgery consultation appointment, you will talk with your surgery scheduler about the process of getting your surgery authorized by your insurance plan and what it means if that authorization is approved or denied.

What happens if my insurance plan doesn't cover phalloplasty?

- If your insurance plan does not cover the surgery, we suggest speaking with University of Michigan Health's patient financial counselors. They

can get you a cost estimate (tell you about how much the surgery will cost) and talk with you about possible financial assistance (resources to help with paying for the surgery). You can call them Monday through Friday between 8:00 AM – 4:00 PM at (734) 232-2621.

- If you decide to have the surgery, our patient financial counselors can also work with you on a payment plan for the **out-of-pocket costs** (the costs that your insurance won't pay for).
- You will still need 1 support letter from a mental health care provider.

What are my next steps to have a phalloplasty?

1. Read through the “What to Expect: Phalloplasty” packet that you received with this handout. This provides more information on the process from consultation appointment to surgery and recovery.
2. Call CGSP at (734) 998-2150 to request a surgery consultation appointment with the phalloplasty surgeons.
 - CGSP will schedule your appointments in the phalloplasty clinic.
 - Before going to your phalloplasty consultation appointment, you will need to go to or watch a phalloplasty information meeting. If you have not gone to one of these meetings, CGSP will help you sign up for an upcoming meeting.
3. Go to a phalloplasty information meeting.
 - This meeting goes over a lot of general information about the surgery, including what happens during the surgery, what the possible risks and complications of the surgery are, and how patients can prepare for surgery and recovery. There is also a presentation on the process of permanent hair removal.
 - **Our surgeons require that patients coming in for a consultation appointment watch the information meeting before their appointment.** This leaves more time during your personal

consultation appointment to talk about your specific situation with the surgeons.

- The phalloplasty information meetings are held about 2-3 times a year as an online video conference (over Zoom). You can register for the next meeting by calling the CGSP office at (734) 998-2150. There is also a flyer for the meeting included with this packet.
- If you cannot go to one of the live meetings, call CGSP to let our team know so that we can send you a recorded version of the presentation.

What happens when I request a surgery consultation appointment?

At the consultation appointment, you will:

- Talk with your surgeon to see if you are a good candidate for surgery (meaning that you are medically ready for phalloplasty).
- Ask your surgeon questions about the surgery.
- Talk with your surgery scheduler about your next steps, including **out-of-pocket costs** (the costs that your insurance won't pay for).

Please note: You will not schedule your surgery date at the consultation appointment.

What are the steps to get support letters for phalloplasty?

1. Meet with your licensed mental health provider or providers to get support letters.
 - Your letter writers must be licensed mental health providers willing and able to write support letters for you to get a phalloplasty. Licensed mental health care providers include:
 - Psychologists
 - Clinical social workers
 - Professional counselors

- Marriage and family therapists
 - Psychiatrists or psychiatric nurse practitioners
 - If you need 2 support letters, you will need to have separate appointments with each letter writer.
 - If you need 2 support letters, the second letter may be written by your primary care provider or hormone care doctor instead of another mental health care provider.
 - If your letter writer has a limited license, their fully licensed supervisor needs to co-sign the letter.
 - If you would like help finding licensed mental health care providers who are able to write your support letters, please call the CGSP office at (734) 998-2150.
2. You or your letter writer can send the letters to us in one of the following ways:
- **Mail:** CGSP, 4250 Plymouth Rd, SPC 5766, Ann Arbor, MI, 48109
 - **Fax:** (734) 998-2152
 - **E-mail:** GenderServices@med.umich.edu
 - If you are sending 2 support letters, it is best if we receive both letters within 6 months of each other (as insurance providers often reject letters that are more than 12 months old).

If you or your letter writer have any questions or concerns about the letter-writing or letter-reviewing process, please call our office at (734) 998-2150.

What information does my licensed mental health care provider need to include in my support letter?

- Our list of guidelines is included at the end of this packet. Please give this list to the licensed mental health care provider who will write your support letter, especially if they don't know the WPATH Standards of Care. If they have any other questions about what to include in the letter,

or if they would like to use a letter template to help them write their letter, please have them contact the CGSP office at (734) 998-2150.

- The guidelines we use to determine if your letter is complete are based on the WPATH Standards of Care. The places where our guidelines are different from WPATH are related to requirements from insurance providers and to medical concerns from our surgical teams.

What happens after I send my support letters to CGSP?

Once we receive your support letters, we will review them as soon as possible. This review makes sure that the support letters address the WPATH Standards of Care guidelines. We will respond in one of 2 ways once we have reviewed your support letters:

- If the support letters do not address the WPATH Standards of Care guidelines, or if we have questions about the support letters, we will contact your letter writers. It's important that your letter writers talk with our office about the letters so that they can update the support letters as needed.
- If we have the appropriate number of complete support letters for you that your insurance provider requires, and if there are no issues with your support letters, we'll let your surgical team know. We will also contact you (by phone or through the online patient portal at MyUofMHealth.org) to let you know that your letter is complete.

When can I join the waitlist for a surgery date?

There are a few steps that need to happen before you can get your surgery date.

- You must be nicotine-free. This means that **you must stop using all products containing nicotine** (including cigarettes, e-cigarettes or vape pens, nicotine patches, nicotine gum, and chewing tobacco).
 - The surgical team may have you tested before scheduling your surgery date to make sure that you don't have nicotine in your

body. If your test shows that you have nicotine in your body, your surgery date will not be scheduled at that time. You will likely need to wait 8-12 weeks before we test you again for nicotine.

- If you smoke or vape marijuana, our surgeons also recommend that you stop completely or switch to marijuana products that are not smoked or vaped, such as edibles.
- You will need to complete any required permanent hair removal at your surgical site (the skin that your surgeon will use to build the new penis).
 - Your plastic surgeon will give you a diagram (detailed drawing) to show you where you will need to remove hair after your surgery consultation appointment. You will then need to begin the process of permanent hair removal at that site.
 - CGSP can give you referrals for hair removal technicians (professionals who do permanent hair removal). Please call the CGSP office at (734) 998-2150 for more information.
- It is best to make sure that your support letter (or letters, if your insurance provider requires 2) is up-to-date and not too old. Many insurance providers won't accept letters that are over 1 year old. We will use the support letters to get insurance pre-authorization for payment from your health insurance provider.

You will join the waitlist for surgery once your surgical team has:

- Confirmed that you are not smoking or vaping anything, and that you are not using nicotine in any form
- Confirmed that you have completed permanent hair removal
- Made sure that your support letter (or letters) is complete and up-to-date
- Gotten insurance pre-authorization from your insurance company for you

Your surgeons' offices will review all of these steps with you at your consultation appointment.

Can I start the permanent hair removal process now?

- You should not start the process of hair removal at the surgical site until you have met with the plastic surgeon.
- There are many possible surgical sites. You will talk with your plastic surgeon about which surgical site to use. If you start the process of permanent hair removal before meeting with your plastic surgeon, you risk permanently removing hair that wasn't necessary for you to remove for surgery.

I'm interested in hysterectomy and vaginectomy as well. Can those surgeries be completed at the same time as the phalloplasty?

If you are a good candidate for surgery and you are interested in having a **hysterectomy** (removal of the uterus) and **vaginectomy** (removing or closing the vagina), we can refer you to a doctor from the Obstetrics and Gynecology department (OBGYN) or another consultation appointment about these procedures. However, you cannot have all these surgeries done at the same time. Expect to wait about 3 months between the surgery for hysterectomy and vaginectomy and the first surgery for phalloplasty to let your body heal and recover.

I don't want hysterectomy and vaginectomy. Do I need to have them in order to have a phalloplasty?

- If you do not want a hysterectomy and vaginectomy, you will still be able to have a "shaft only" phalloplasty. This type of phalloplasty will not include urethral lengthening.

- **Urethral lengthening** is a procedure to make the urethra (the tube that pee moves through to leave your body) longer so that it extends to the tip of the new penis. This procedure helps a person to pee standing up.
- If you want urethral lengthening as a part of your phalloplasty, you must also have hysterectomy and vaginectomy. If you have more questions about this, please bring them to your consultation appointment with your phalloplasty surgeons.

Who do I contact if I have questions about this process or my support letters?

Please contact our office by phone at (734) 998-2150 on Monday through Friday between 8:00 AM – 4:30 PM.

- We can also help your letter writer if they have any questions about the letter writing process and how they can make sure that the support letter addresses the WPATH Standards of Care guidelines.

If you have already had your consultation appointment and you have questions about your next steps after that appointment, please contact the Urology or Plastic Surgery clinics directly. They can be reached Monday through Friday between 8:00 AM – 4:30 PM.

- **Urology:** (734) 936-7030
- **Plastic Surgery:** (734) 998-6022

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