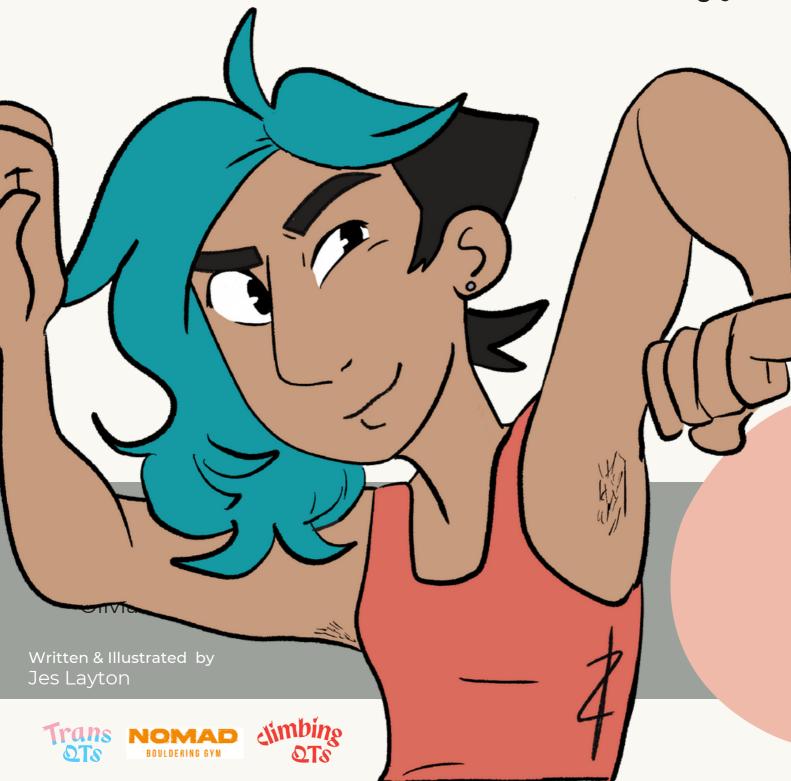
Your Guide to Climbing Pre & Post Gender Affirming Surgery

A Trans and Gender Diverse Climbers Resource from ClimbingQTs



YOUR GUIDE TO CLIMBING PRE & POST GENDER AFFIRMING SURGERY

This resource has been borne out of a need to help prepare TGD climbers for gender affirming surgery in relation to their climbing practice. This resource will provide practical tips to TGD climbers wanting to get back into climbing after gender affirming surgery. It will also cover ways for TGD climbers to take care of themselves and their bodies pre- and post-op, and foster a healthier, restful relationship between their climbing and their new body!

For further information or resources check out www.climbingqts.com

Acknowledgements

The resource was compiled and designed upon the unceded traditional lands of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation. Always was, always will be.

Contact Information

For further information, please contact ClimbingQTs via email: info@climbingqts.com.au or visit our website at www.climbingqts.com.

We also have a facebook page and Instagram profile @climbingqts. Join the <u>ClimbingQTs Community Discord</u> to stay up to date with our events, initiatives and other activities.

GLOSSARY-BEFORE WE BEGIN

Agender - an identity under the nonbinary and transgender umbrella terms. Agender individuals find that they have no gender identity, although some define it more as having a gender identity that is neutral.

Bottom surgery - Gender affirming surgery of the genital reproductive organs. It is important to remember that surgery may not be accessible for many reasons, or wanted, and that surgery is not a requirement for a trans person to be valid.

Cisgender - describes people whose gender presentation and expression matches the one that they were assigned at birth.

Donor site - The donor site is where a thin shaving of skin has been taken from one part of the body to be used as a skin graft.

Feminising - the obtaining of more traditionally feminine features/characteristics.

Feminising hormone therapy - is a type of HRT that administers estrogens and/or antiandrogens to a person for the purpose of feminising their secondary sexual characteristics.

Gender affirmation / transition - an umbrella term for the range of actions and possibilities involved in living, surviving, and thriving as a person's authentic gendered self. What gender affirmation looks like for every individual trans person is unique and based on what is personally affirming, what feels safe to do, and what is accessible and available.

Gender dysphoria (and gender euphoria) - Gender dysphoria is the feeling of distress caused by the desire to have the physical characteristics and/or related experiences of the gender you identify as. Gender euphoria on the other hand is a feeling of joy that a person can have when they think, act and are perceived in ways that align with their true gender identity.



Genderqueer - a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with non cis gender/s or a combination of genders.

HRT - is the abbreviation of Hormone Replacement Therapy also called Transgender Hormone Therapy or gender-affirming hormone therapy, is a form of hormone therapy in which sex hormones and other hormonal medications are administered to transgender or gender non-conforming individuals for the purpose of more closely aligning their secondary sexual characteristics with their gender identity. This form of hormone therapy is given as one of two types, based on whether the goal of treatment is masculinisation or feminisation.

Mammaplasty - a form of plastic surgery to enhance, create or reduce breast tissue. Commonly considered a gender affirming surgery.

Masculinising - the obtaining of more traditionally masculine features/characteristics.

Masculinising hormone therapy - is a type of HRT that administers androgens or antiestrogens to a person for the purpose of masculinising their secondary sexual characteristics.

Metoidioplasty - a gender-affirming, lower body surgery that creates a penis by cutting ligaments around the erectile tissue (clitoris) to release it from the pubis and give the shaft more length.

Non-binary - an umbrella term for gender identities that are neither male nor female—identities that are outside the gender binary.

Phalloplasty - the gender affirming multi-staged surgical creation of a penis. Scrotoplasty - the surgical formation of a scrotum as a part of gender affirmation surgery. **TGD -** an acronym meaning 'Transgender and Gender Diverse' relating to peoples who are transgender and/or gender diverse (not cisgendered).

Top surgery - Referring to a person having a gender affirming surgical intervention to reduce dysphoria. This may include removal of breast tissue, masculine contouring, and/or realigning or removal of nipples, breast implants or augmentation. Not all TGD people will want or feel they need this, and it is not a requirement to be valid as a TGD person.

Trans and gender diverse - This is an umbrella phrase for people whose gender does not match what they were assigned at birth.

Trans or Transgender - describes individuals whose gender does not match the sex they were assigned at birth.

Vaginoplasty - is the process during which surgeons construct a vaginal cavity between the rectum and the urethra as a part of gender affirming surgery.



INTRODUCTION

So you've had or are about to have gender affirming surgery. Congratulations!

As a climber and outdoor enthusiast, one of the myriad of thoughts that might be on your mind right now is when can you get back to the gym after your gender-affirming surgery. It can be hard to find guidance on returning to the wall or getting back into a harness post-surgery, but look no further,

This guide isn't going to sugarcoat it; recovering from surgery (any kind of surgery) can be a difficult and slow process, especially given such an emotionally charged procedure. However, gender affirming surgery does not mean the end of your climbing adventures! It simply means that you have to ease back into climbing with your new body, and take some steps pre-surgery to ensure a safe and smooth recovery.



Remember that this is just a guide. Only YOU know your body and your limits (and you should always consult with your physician/doctor about your plans to exercise/climb both pre and post-surgery). While there may be movements that are uncomfortable after, skills that need to be re-learnt and muscle rebuilt—never do anything that causes you pain or causes you to bleed. Know your body's limits and be sure to take care of it!



WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY GENDER AFFIRMATION/GENDER AFFIRMING?

Gender affirmation is an umbrella term for the range of actions and possibilities (including surgery) involved in living, surviving, and thriving as our authentic gendered selves.

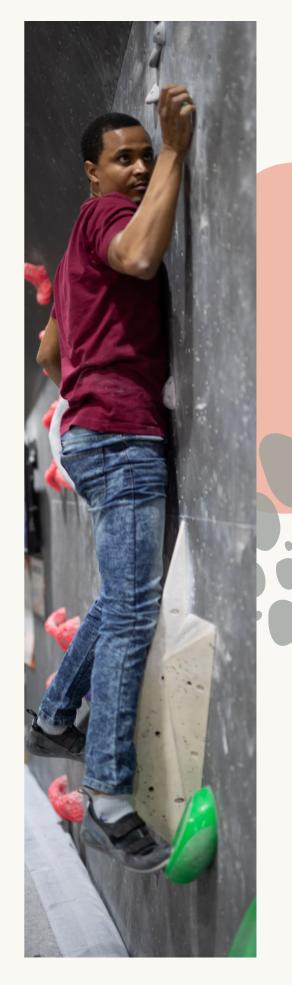
What gender affirmation looks like for every individual trans person is unique and based on what is personally affirming, what feels safe to do, and what is accessible and available. For some people, this includes various medical procedures that some trans or gender diverse people may use to affirm their care.

There are many different gender affirming surgeries and procedures which make changes to your face, chest, genitals, or other body parts, including:

 Facial reconstructive surgery to make facial features more masculine or feminine. I.e: fillers, liposuction, tracheal shave, facial feminisation/ masculinisation and vocal surgery.

- Chest or "Top" surgery to remove breast tissue for a more masculine appearance or enhance breast size and shape for a more feminine appearance i.e Breast augmentation, mastectomy,
- Genital or "Bottom" surgery to transform and reconstruct the genitalia. i.e: orchiectomy, vulvoplasty, vaginoplasty, hysterectomy, metoidioplasty or phalloplasty.

Gender affirming surgeries are positive and life-changing events for most trans, nonbinary and gender diverse/gender expansive people. It's also important to remember that most gender affirming operations are considered major surgical procedures. This means that you'll need substantial time to rest, recover, and recuperate before resuming work, exercise, and your normal routines. Timelines may vary and your surgeon will give you the best advice about when it is okay to resume your adventuring activities and to what degree.



PRE-SURGERY CARE FOR CLIMBERS

It's well known that physical fitness can help a lot in recovery from surgery. Patients in their best shape (physically and mentally) before their operations tend to do better and heal faster. Given the variety and range of possible gender affirming surgeries; what specific exercises, moments and considerations you take in your pre-surgery can differ.

What to expect -

In general it's important to prepare mentally for your surgery, because-as already said earlier-gender affirming surgeries are major surgical procedures, even without all of the emotion involved. If you haven't already done so, talk to fellow climbers who have undergone gender affirmation procedures or read first-hand accounts. While these conversations and insights might be helpful in preparing you beforehand, keep in mind that not everything will be applicable to your individual situation.

Another good thing to remember is that staying social is important for healing! Yes, don't expect to be able to jump right back on the wall after your surgery, but do know that your healing doesn't mean you have to be cut off from the climbing community! Climbing gyms and crags are still open to you even when you aren't climbing, in fact some climbing gyms and social climbing events (like ClimbingQTs meetups) even let you in for free if you're not climbing.

What you can generally expect after any gender affirming surgery will be a loss of strength and mobility as you return to climbing. This is natural and understandable, but it is not the end of the world. You can build your base back up! (more info on this below).

Planning ahead -

The best way to ensure you will be back on the wall or at the crag in safety and comfort post-surgery is by planning ahead.

Having a thoughtful recovery plan in place is an absolute must, as is knowing whether you have any friends or family who can help you out for a few days after your surgery. Having a support system is vital to your continued health both right after surgery and long term. So plan to celebrate your new rocking bod with a couple of friends or family! Plan ahead by letting your regular climbing pals know if you have any training/climbing goals post-surgery. We all know we feel more improved and motivated on achieving our climbing goals when we share them with others.

The actual timing of your surgical procedure might be something you would like to consider. While climbing is something you can do all year round, the best time for climbing tends to be in spring and autumn. You may want to plan the timing of your surgery and recovery in the off-season so you can prepare your body in the on-season beforehand and/or return to climbing in the on-season after.

You may be used to climbing and training on leggings, sports bras, tank tops. Etc. An important consideration to keep in mind is that with genderaffirming surgery, your body will change. You may want to shop ahead for some new climbing clothes that will better fit your new body/ Prioritising clothing that is both comfortable to climb and exist in.

Preparing your body -

Understandably, you'll have a limited range of motion for a few months after your surgery, so making yourself as mobile as possible beforehand can help prevent a buildup of pain from those restrictions.

Knowing this, it seems that the ideal time to start preparing your body for gender-affirming surgery is right now! Does that seem a bit daunting? Don't worry, at minimum the recommendation is six to eight weeks out from your surgery date to start honing your focus in on certain parts of the body, and certain types of strength training, to give your body the best shot at a safe recovery with minimal strength and mobility loss when you climb.

For climbers, the main concerns post surgery involve a loss of skills, strength and mobility. The goal of specifically preparing your climbing body for surgery is to help offload how much strength/mobility you will need to get back in order to reach the skill level you have right now (presurgery).

Before you begin, take some time to think about which muscles you are using during an exercise vs which form of gender affirming surgery you are undergoing. (You might want to consult your doctor as well to see if they have any suggestions for specific target areas).

IF ASSIGNED BED REST EXERCISES, STICK WITH THEM!

In order to slow the rate of muscle loss, many healthcare professionals will give directions for simple strengthening exercises to be performed in bed, called bed rest exercises. It is important to do exactly the type and amount of bed rest exercises assigned in order to avoid complications with the surgical site. Some examples of bed rest exercises include ankle pumps, quad sets, and glute squeezes. Sometimes a surgeon may recommend bed rest exercises be continued even after leaving the hospital to maintain muscle bulk while cardiovascular exercise might be more restricted.

The goal of this exercise should be to begin building a higher baseline of fitness or muscle bulk for specifically surgery-affected areas to begin with. This way your body will have more of a reserve when it comes to muscle/skill loss during recovery.

There are a few simple ways to do this like trying to climb on higher grades/more difficult climbs, shifting your focus from sending routes and gaining muscle to focusing more on building up your balance and coordination etc.

However, here are some specific exercises recommended for both top and bottom surgeries that you can do that will translate well into your climbing.

Bottom surgery suggestions:

• Planks: muscles worked - abdominal muscles, latissimus dorsi, quadratus lumborum, hip flexors, posterior.



- Pistol squats: muscles worked glutes, quads, hamstrings, hip adductors, calves, core muscles.
- Deadlifts: muscles worked hamstrings, glutes, back., hips, core, trapezius.
- Box jumps: muscles worked glutes, hamstrings, quadriceps, and calves.

Top surgery:

- Push ups: muscles worked chest, triceps, shoulders.
- Lying Triceps extension: muscles worked triceps.
- Pull ups: muscles worked latissimus dorsi, biceps, core, upper back.
- Lat pulldowns: muscles worked latissimus dorsi, trapezius, rotator cuff, posterior deltoids, rhomboids, biceps, and forearms.
- Resistance band pull-apart: muscles worked rotator cuff muscles, forearms, lateral deltoids.

Final thoughts on pre-surgery care -

Having, or wanting surgery of any kind does not make you more or less of the woman, man, non-binary, or just person that you already are, and is just one more point of difference in the many ways we exist as trans people. While in many cases gender affirming surgery can be life saving, it is not a cure-all for the struggles that trans people face.



That message isn't exactly upbeat, but it's an important thing to remember. While gender-affirming surgery does have a huge satisfaction rate, it may not always get rid of gender dysphoria. It's important for both pre and post surgery that if you're struggling with gender dysphoria, anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, make sure you're taking all the steps needed to take care of your mental health.

- With any form of recovery it is best to eat healthy, balanced meals and drink
 plenty of water before, during and after. In the case of reduced activity it'll be
 important to keep up those hydration levels as due to the necessary inactivity
 after surgery constipation can cause/worsen constipation.
- There is nothing wrong with asking your doctor for specific exercises to improve your surgery results. Let your doctor know about your climbing passion and your desired outcomes in regards to getting back into climbing post-surgery. Throughout the process you can always ask for help! If you are unsure about anything consult your doctor, or a fitness professional.
- Be aware that some surgeons, especially in the case of phalloplasty and vaginoplasty, may restrict even the most basic of exercise for up to eight weeks due to the very delicate nature of the microsurgery.
- Most surgeons will need a readiness referral from a mental health provider stating that you are able to consent to undergo gender affirming surgery, and that the intervention is right for you. Reconstructive genital surgeries typically require two such referrals. Find out more about readiness referrals here.
- Surgery can be very expensive, whether in Australia or overseas, but some people might be eligible for early release of superannuation to help cover the costs, which you can find more about <u>here</u>.
- By focusing on caring for and strengthening your body during the pre-stage of your surgery, you'll be better able to climb safer, and with more potential euphoria in the future!



POST-SURGERY CARE FOR CLIMBERS

Congratulations on your new rocking bod! This is quite a big deal even if you've been looking forward to it and are happy with the result, gender affirming surgery can still be quite confronting. It will take some time to get used to your new body, but when you are ready (and when your doctor says you are able) to begin returning to climbing—whether the operation was a hysterectomy, mammaplasty or a phalloplasty—the below is here to help get you ROCK'n'rolling!

What to expect -

- After your surgery, you may notice your body feels and moves differently. It's important to be sure to balance out your return to climbing with both rest and healing to help your body in its recovery. Take each day slowly, paying attention to how your body is feeling.
- Typically after a long break us climbers will experience the skin on our hands softening, and becoming more sensitive.
 You may lose the bulk of those well earned calluses due to the lack of constant contact with the rock or ledge on the wall. Be prepared to have to build back those good ole dry, cracked but durable hands.



- Expect the general (and understandable) soreness, bruising, and swelling post any major surgery. There is also the possibility of small risk surgical complications including bleeding and infection. After surgery should you experience these for more than a few days it is best to contact your healthcare provider, who will also be able to give you more information on any special dressings, surgical garments, or follow up care.
- Go easy on your body with its loss of conditioning, muscle, and overall strength. We all know how regular climbing improves the efficiency of your body, so it's understandable that after a bit of a break there may be a decline in your skill level and baseline. By engaging in a considered pre-op exercise routine not pushing yourself too hard, and a combo of strength training and re-skilling, this can be built upon.



IT'S ALL IN THE FINGERS!

Our recommendation is to prioritise finger climbing and finger exercises while you heal. For either top or bottom surgery, but specifically for anyone who has undergone top surgery there is a recommendation of not lifting more than 5 kilos for the first two weeks. During this time if you are still keen to train, you can focus on exercises for your grip strength and fingers. Allow fingerboards to be your best friend.

Before you hit the ground running -

It's generally recommended that post surgery (after about 6-8 weeks with your surgeon's permission) to engage in some moderate intensity exercise sessions at home.

By doing these at home sessions you will be better able to take note of any post-op changes (how deeply can you breathe in, your tiredness levels, flexibility etc) and not have to get to know your new climbing body out in front of people at the gym or crag.

This is also a good time to test out any new clothing you may have brought for your new climbing body in the privacy of your own home, to make sure it is functional and comfortable to both climb and just *exist* in.

For the most part, specialised gear isn't required for returning to climbing after gender affirming surgery. For those who have undergone bottom surgery and increased external genitalia (specifically in regards to phalloplasty, as you may find that your penis does not bend downward much for four months or so) compression shorts, jock strap or leggings may be helpful to minimise bothersome jostling and for extra support.

For those who gained external breast/chest tissue during their top surgery, a supportive sports bra or will be your best friend, but be sure to size correctly and seek the advice of your doctor before any formal purchases.



In general you should also consider any skin grafts you may have received when thinking about your climbing clothes. You'll want to avoid any discomfort, rubbing, jostling or scratching, as well as exposure and 'fuzziness' of any material near your surgical or graft sights.

Once you are up out of bed and ready to get back into it, there are a number of considerations you can take that will translate well into your climbing.

- Reduce your potential of falling by traversing routes lower to the ground and spending more time route reading (so you're not getting to a point where, during your climb, you need to jump/fall off).
- Climb more statically overall.
- After bottom surgery avoid working the core or anything that involves any intra abdominal pressure.
- Pending any possible arm skin grafts, after gender affirming surgery
 you should focus on training your fingers, arms and shoulders. Let's face
 it: hangboarding kind of sucks. Especially when you compare it to how
 fun climbing is. Unfortunately, it's also some of the most beneficial
 training you can do.
- If your post-surgery healing prevents you from hanging with your arms overhead, consider making yourself a <u>pinch block</u> or a crimp bloc.
 These tools will let you train finger strength just as effectively as a hangboard and don't require loading your shoulders and arms in an overhead position.
- After bottom surgery avoid the lower body that isn't from the knees down.
- After top surgery you should focus on your legs (which climbers in general tend to neglect!) Try to engage with unilateral leg work such as a two legged squat but holding and pulsing in intervals, or squatting on one leg and using a bench for stability.

- Do not raise your arms past 90 degrees for the first few weeks back. Try to restrict the amount of pulling you engage with as you climb. Focus on climbing on slabs (which puts weight on your feet more so than your arms) rather than overhanging.
- After top surgery avoid any intense pulling or pushing (although pulling is generally better after recovering from top surgery as pulling works
 the very muscles most affected).

There are a multitude of ways you can still improve your climbing without aggravating your healing body. If you can't climb, fingerboard. If you can't fingerboard, train strength and core. When all else fails, work on mobility and flexibility.

Fingerboarding Considerations -

Now, before you rush off and start an intensive fingerboard cycle...

Just because you're injured and have an excess of pent up energy from not climbing doesn't mean it's time to go start fingerboarding seven days a week. Your fingerboard sessions are strength workouts, not a fun bouldering session. Don't just do a bunch of random hangs. Pick a protocol and commit to following it. Which protocol you pick is less important than sticking with it. The general recommendation is two to three fingerboard sessions per week. Be disciplined and you'll get back to sending faster than you thought possible.

Do not climb on any post-surgery pain medication that you're using! This is incredibly important both to ensure you are as clear-headed as possible on the wall, preventing other injuries from occurring, (like muscle strain and sprains, and is also integral in the interest of keeping you from doing 'too much too soon' in your eagerness.

IMPORTANT!

'Sucking' vs 'Recovering' -

In climbing, even a break of a few weeks can reduce your climbing skills and fitness. It's a tough reality that can be a hard pill to swallow for many climbers who may feel despondent, frustrated or discouraged with the loss of muscle mass, grip strength and/or mobility.

It's hard to stay motivated after climbing at your at-one-time highest level. When things that used to be effortless, that you had worked so hard to make effortless, become challenging again or near impossible. It's discouraging remembering where your skills were vs where they are now post surgery.

That being said, your first day back will be a pleasant surprise if you take a few things into consideration when returning to the wall or the crag and avoid the trap of pushing yourself too far, too quickly.

One of the best ways to ensure you have the smoothest return to climbing post-surgery is to shift the metrics of your climbing. i.e: instead of your focus being on sending a problem, you will have a better time (and will gain more) from shifting your attention to learning a new technique or mastering something that you haven't paid as much time to before, or have been putting off. Why not get into deadlifting? How are your heel-hooks? Ever wanted to try a more static climbing style?

Below are just a few more suggestions of ways you can place less onus on completing/sending climbs faster while still engaging in the climbing you love:

- **Social Climbing!** We all know it's better to climb with pals! It also helps to take the pressure off when you have the support (and distraction) of your fellow climbers with you.
- **Climbing on the Crag!** Once cleared by your doctor (particularly if you have had bottom surgery) and further out from your operation, why not put on a harness, helmet and give climbing out on natural rock a try!

- Change of Scenery! Sometimes all it takes to quieten the little voice in your head feeling frustrated with your recovery is to shake things up a bit! Try climbing in a new gym! A change of scenery in some instances can be novel enough that it helps lessen the frustrations you may be feeling. Typically when we climb at a new gym, with new routes, in a new area, the unfamiliarity of it all can lead us to taking things a little easier as we try to find our feet. We're more forgiving of ourselves and in most cases may not even notice that we're not climbing as hard as we would normally at our regular haunts.
- Mastery of the Lower V! Similar to shifting the metrics of your climbing, actually finding challenge and joy returning to lower grade climbs to truly master them can be a rewarding exercise in itself. While you do this, try not to think of your climbing as training to reach VIO again, look at it as training to climb your first V4 post surgery, and then V5, V6 and so on. By going back to lower grades, you also have a great opportunity to practise those new techniques you're working on.

Overall, try not to think about your climbing "sucking" when you start back. Think about it as "recovering." If you are determined, you will climb at your former level and better eventually, when committed absences from climbing can help break plateaus! Everyone goes through this at some point in their climbing life, staying positive and focused can be the best recovery tools. With the nature of injuries and everyday interruptions, there are natural ebbs and flows to climbing. But when you come at a problem focusing on what you CAN do and now what you CAN'T (yet) do- it can make the gains post-surgery some of the most rewarding work you have done.



FINAL THOUGHTS ON POST-SURGERY CARE

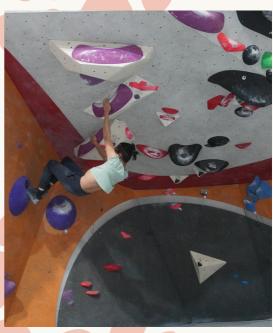
You didn't become the climber that you are today by not accepting a challenge! But remember your recovery is not scaled on a metric. Take it slow. After any time off, know that your body won't be in the same shape that it was before. The good news is, it shouldn't take you too long to get back to where you were before- and then exceed it! Be patient and take the time to build your fitness back up. Listen to your body. Even if enough weeks have passed, if something feels uncomfortable or painful, stop. Wait. Heal.

Ultimately, the most important thing to keep in mind when getting back to climbing post surgery is **kindness**. Be kind to your body, and kind to yourself. Take the time to love and appreciate the change your body has gone through and all of the changes that are sure to come as you recover.

And who knows, maybe rebuilding your base will be one of the more rewarding challenges you've had!







LINKS & RESOURCES

- "Binding While Climbing" resource by ClimbingQTs http://climbingqts.com/transqts
- "Inside Out: An Introduction to the Great Outdoors for Indoor Climbers" ClimbingQTs resource https://www.climbingqts.com/news/inside-out-a-introduction-to-the-great-outdoors-for-indoor-climbers
- Zoe Belle Gender Collective (ZBGC) <u>www.zbgc.org.au</u>
- Transgender Victoria http://transgendervictoria.com
- YGender https://ygender.org.au
- TransHub Language https://www.transhub.org.au/language







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CREDITS

This resource was compiled in partnership with TGD climbers with lived experience, existing information, in partnership with NOMAD Bouldering Gym, as well as with consultation from Physiotherapist and *Climbing Care* coach **Dr Mattias Braach-Maksvytis** (DPT), he/him.

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This information is for educational purposes only, please consult a healthcare provider before exercising/climbing post gender affirming care, and always follow your surgeon's advice.









Credits 22