

Choosing Breast Reconstruction: What A Woman Should Consider

Each year over 180,000 new cases of breast cancer will be diagnosed. With that comes the emotion of confronting the disease head on, and the education of finding the best choices and resources available today.

The good news is women are surviving breast cancer, and getting back to their normal lives at a much quicker pace than ever before. According to the Susan G Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, the five-year survival rate for women diagnosed with breast cancer today is 90 percent. And when breast cancer is confined to the breast, the five-year survival rate jumps up to 98 percent. Most will live a full life and never have recurrence.

While every woman is unique in their treatment, undoubtedly many will face the necessity of a mastectomy. A mastectomy will remove tissue and possibly the nipple-areolar complex, depending on the severity of the disease.

After a mastectomy, a woman will have many options available to her; what's right for one won't necessarily be right for another. She may choose to wear external breast forms or pads. She may choose breast reconstruction, using either breast implants or her own tissue. Or she may choose to do nothing at all.

With today's advances in plastic surgery techniques, breast reconstruction is a viable option for many women. Because breast reconstruction after mastectomy is part of the treatment of the disease, and not an elected cosmetic surgery, most health insurance companies will pay the major portion of the cost of the procedure.

Breast reconstruction is used to restore anatomy and symmetry to a woman's figure. It's used not only to change a woman's physical appearance, but to also provide her with psychological benefits as well.

To maintain as little change as possible, many surgeons recommend immediate reconstruction procedures to reduce the trauma of having a breast removed, as well as the expense and discomfort of having two major operations. It is also possible to do reconstruction months or even years later, especially if a woman is undergoing chemotherapy or radiation treatments. Always discuss your options with your surgical team before each procedure to determine which is the right step for you.

Breast reconstruction offers a woman the chance to return to a look similar to what she had before her mastectomy. There are a variety of techniques available, depending on her goals and medical condition.

She may choose reconstruction using implants, or by using flaps of tissue moved from other parts of her body.

She may choose nipple-areola reconstruction to give her a more natural appearance. Nipple/areola reconstruction is usually performed after the reconstruction of the breast is complete, to give the new tissue a chance to heal and adjust. It can either be constructed from tissue from the newly created breast, or can be created as a prosthetic made from a copy of a woman's natural nipple.

A typical surgery for mastectomy is about two hours, with reconstructive procedures taking an additional one to six hours. For the first few days after surgery, a woman might experience discomfort, but will be given pain medication as needed. Her hospital stay will depend on the length and technique of the procedure, but will typically be anywhere from two to six days.

Most women can return to normal activities within six weeks of the surgery. A patient will experience some bruising, and may feel numbness and tightness as the area heals. In time, some feeling may return to your breast.

After a breast reconstruction, it's important to continue monthly self-exams, and annual screenings and mammograms. While breast reconstruction has no bearing on cancer recurrence, it also won't protect you from future reappearance.

About the Author

Dr Jeremy Williams is a Denver board certified plastic and reconstructive surgeon. Dr. Williams is a Colorado native who has returned home after completing extensive training in plastic surgery at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, MD. He believes that whether you are seeking aesthetic rejuvenation or reconstructive restoration, that enhancement of your image should be natural and above all, safe. Visit his practice at

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