

# Clothing Ideas for Women with Breast Cancer

**Appearance** may be one of your many concerns after breast cancer. It is easier to get on with your life and future when you feel confident about your appearance. Although getting better and feeling well is a personal challenge, no one should feel alone in the struggle because many support groups organized by hospitals and other community groups are available to provide assistance.

This fact sheet is intended to answer some of the clothing questions you may have related to your changes in physical appearance that occur as a result of cancer treatment. It provides some ideas to consider for maintaining a natural look.

Following breast surgery or radiation therapy, clothing comfort is a primary concern. Your body and skin will feel tender and you'll want to go "braless" at first. Soft camisoles or knit tops may provide both comfort and modesty during this time, while an easy-fit front-opening blouse, sweatshirt, or soft sweater may be easiest to get on and off. You may have edema or swelling of the arm if your surgery was extensive and it may be difficult to raise your arm.

Some women who have a double mastectomy decide that a flat chest is just fine and make clothing choices with that in mind. But, with a single mastectomy, you may feel more balanced and your clothes may fit

better if a properly fitted prosthesis is worn. Also, a properly weighted prosthesis helps correct the weight imbalance created by the breast loss that can lead to posture problems, back, neck, and shoulder aches and pains.

If your treatment involves chemotherapy, you will probably lose your hair. Some women prefer to go "bald" as a mark of courage. Others express their creativity through design or adoption of interesting hats, scarves and head coverings. Others prefer wigs that match their previous hairstyle or try a new one for a change. Look for head covering ideas from Tender Loving Care, 1-800-850-9445.

## Prosthesis Selection

Until your doctor gives permission for a permanent prosthesis, if you need one, a temporary form may be obtained through "Reach to Recovery," volunteers of the American Cancer Society. They will probably call on you as a friend who has experienced the same problem. They may suggest lightweight padding that can be made of a variety of non-irritating materials such as cotton balls, polyester fiber-fill, lamb's wool, or old nylon hose to make a temporary form. These lightweight materials tend to "ride up" and are too light for adequate balance so are usually not satisfactory for permanent use.

You can find a lot of information about prostheses from catalogs or on

the internet with a key word search "breast prosthesis." Catalog companies have specially trained sales staff to answer questions and help you make the right selection. A few such companies are listed at the end of this fact sheet.

Breast prostheses are available in many brands and styles for a wide range of sizes. The extent of your surgery will suggest the shape you need. After a radical mastectomy, a prosthesis may need an asymmetrical shape or an extra "tail" to fit into cavities in the chest wall or axillary area. A "modified radical" calls for a prosthesis that will replace the missing breast(s) and possibly fit into the cavity in the axillary area(s). A simple mastectomy requires a prosthesis to replace the missing breast.

Many shapes are available: asymmetrical shapes for right or left side, oval, teardrop, crescent, as well as the symmetrical triangle shapes. They are available in light and dark skin tones and may have a colored nipple/areola. Most are formed of high-grade medical silicone so that they look, feel and move like a natural breast.

In 1999, prostheses ranged in cost from \$20 for latex and \$40 for polyurethane foam to over \$300 for certain silicone styles. Medicare or your health insurance may cover 80 per cent of the costs.

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Most of the forms come with washable covers in cotton/Lycra® spandex or nylon knits. Some forms are designed to be adhered to the skin, others to be worn inside pockets of specially designed mastectomy or surgical bras, and others to be worn with regular bras.

Selecting a comfortable bra is important. To find your bra size, follow these directions:

- Measure around your body just below your breast tissue.
- Add 5 inches. If the sum is an uneven number, the next even number is your size. For example, you measure 32 inches + 5 = 37. Your bra band and bra size should be 38.
- Establish cup size by measuring across the nipple line from your center front around to center back.
- Multiply by 2. If the answer is the same as your band size, your cup size is “A.”
- If the answer is 1 inch more, you need B cup; if 2 inches, C cup; etc.

Keeping a balanced chest appearance while wearing a prosthesis is a common problem. You’ll soon learn to check in the mirror after dressing to be sure your bustline is level.

When you are wearing a silicone prosthesis, it is important not to put excessive pressure on the form as you might during weightlifting or some exercise workouts. Too much pressure can burst the form so it leaks and must be replaced.

## Clothing Selection

In all likelihood, you can wear most of your previous wardrobe after breast surgery. Some points to keep in mind as you select new clothes or wear the ones you had before the surgery are:

- opaque fabrics will conceal undergarments and scars — sheer fabrics show through;
- patterned prints hide more body form irregularities than solid colors;
- dull textures are less revealing than shiny ones;
- lightweight fabrics cause less pressure on the shoulders and chest;
- clinging fabrics may reveal more than you want to show;
- yoke or draped designs with pleats or gathers over the bustline may be more attractive than a smooth fit;
- fleece knits can provide both softness and warmth;
- cotton jersey or sweatshirt knits are soft, stretch for comfort, and are absorbent;
- front-opening tops, shirts, jackets, and sweaters are easier to put on and take off;
- zippers should be fabric-backed for comfort;
- wearing your favorite colors can lift your spirits;
- straight cut jackets and blouses tend to hide curves;
- blouson-design dresses give lengthwise ease and conceal bust changes;
- necklines should not be overly revealing; cowl or loose fitting collars are good;
- dropped, raglan, or dolman sleeves may be more comfortable than set-in sleeves that fit closely.

Swimsuits featuring cups for prostheses, wide straps, and built-up necklines, armholes, and backs are available. Look in local stores, catalogs, or on the Web.

Sleepwear is available in a variety of soft fabrics from tricot to cotton flannel. Front-opening shirt styles or those with wide shoulders can conceal surgical marks and are easy to get on and off.

## Sources to check

- J.C. Penney 1-800-709-5777 — prostheses, apparel, supplies
- Jodee Catalog 1-800-821-2767 — bras & prostheses
- Lands' End, Inc. 1-800-356-4444 — knit apparel and outerwear
- Paula Young Fashion Wigs 1-800-343-9695 — wigs and head coverings
- Sears 1-800-278-8808 — prostheses, swimsuits, health care supplies.
- TLC 1-800-850-9445 — wigs, head coverings, prostheses, bras, gowns.

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