

Breast implants

Some women feel their breasts are too small and elect to have them enlarged (breast augmentation). This type of surgery can also be used after mastectomy to reproduce the look of an original breast when a woman is dressed in normal clothes.

Enlarging the breasts requires the insertion of implants. An incision (cut) is made around the nipple, or under the breast or armpit. The implant is pushed through and positioned either behind or in front of the chest muscles (pectorals). There will be bruising and swelling for a few weeks.

Complications can include the formation of hard scar tissue around the implant, implant deflation and implants that wander out of position. Both silicone and saline implants have limited life spans and need to be removed or replaced after a certain amount of time. However, there is no way to predict how long an implant will last. You should try to find out as much as you can before you make a decision to have breast implants.

Approved silicone implants are considered safe

There have been various concerns raised about the use of silicone breast implants in recent years. For some time their use in Australia was restricted. Some of the health concerns regarding breast implants included the suspicions that silicone may cause, or contribute to, certain diseases.

Various studies in recent years have demonstrated that approved silicone breast implants are safe to use. Except in very exceptional circumstances, only silicone implants approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration can be used.

Complications

Some of the complications of breast augmentation include:

- The usual risks of major surgery, such as a bad reaction to the anaesthetic, haemorrhaging, blood clots and infection.
- A greater risk of infection due to the presence of a foreign object.
- Permanent scarring.
- Capsular formation and contraction, when an envelope of scar tissue grows around the implant and shrinks, causing deformity and pain.
- Implant rupture, indicated by the deflation and flattening of the breast.
- Sensation changes to the breast and nipple, such as tender oversensitivity or numbness.
- Calcium deposits in the breast tissue.
- Granulomas, or lumps in local lymph node tissue formed by leaking silicone.
- Breastfeeding difficulties, due to the altered shape of breast or nipple.
- Reduced milk supply when breastfeeding, perhaps due to nerve damage.
- Wandering implants that end up positioned too high or too low.
- Reduced effectiveness of breast cancer screening, since an implant may hide breast tissue (and tumours) during a mammogram.

Testing for leaks is difficult

The saline from a ruptured saline implant is absorbed by the body, but leaking silicone can gather inside the breast or migrate to nearby tissues. An intact silicone implant may also leak small amounts of silicone. Tests such as mammograms, ultrasound scans and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans may not reliably show whether an implant is leaking because the tiny drops of silicone are too small to be detected.

Breast implants and mammograms

A mammogram is performed by gently pressing the breast between two plates, then taking an x-ray. It is important to tell the radiographer that you have implants before undergoing a mammogram. If the radiographer performs the scan in the usual way, the pressure might split an implant or squeeze more silicone into the surrounding breast tissue if the implant is already leaking.

Treatment options

Ruptured implants need to be removed and, if desired, replaced. Despite intensive medical investigation, the long term health effects of ruptured silicone implants and the release of silicone inside the body are not conclusively known. Current evidence suggests that silicone is not associated with an increased risk of certain diseases.

The body may respond to an implant by encasing it within a hard shell of scar tissue, which then shrinks. This is called a capsular formation and contracture. Symptoms include shrivelling and hardening of the breasts. A closed capsulotomy involves pressing on the breast hard enough to break the scar capsule, although there is a risk of rupturing the implant too. Surgery to remove the scar capsule is called open capsulotomy.

Symptoms that need medical attention

Always see your doctor or surgeon if you are concerned about your implant. Signs that your implant may need attention include:

- Pain
- Deflation
- Changes to breast or nipple shape
- Changes to skin texture, such as rippling
- Swelling of the breast
- Hardening of the breast.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your surgeon
- The Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons Tel. 1300 367 446

Things to remember

- Breast implants are used to enlarge healthy breasts or reproduce the look of an original breast after mastectomy.
- You should find out as much as you can before deciding to have breast implants.
- Some of the complications of breast augmentation include the formation of hard scar tissue, rupturing or deflation of the implants, and loss of nipple sensation.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Better Health Channel

This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. The information provided was accurate at the time of publication and is not intended to take the place of medical advice. Please seek advice from a qualified health care professional.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2010 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.