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Breast augmentation

The size of breasts is genetically determined. Once developed, the breasts may fluctuate in size in response to changes in weight, pregnancy and breast feeding. The aging process causes the shape of the breast to change so that they gradually droop (called ptosis). Most women have breasts of slightly different sizes, but occasionally a very marked difference may develop.

The operation

Breasts can be made larger by placing an implant either under the breast tissue or behind the muscle on which the breast lies. Implants are usually inserted through incisions in the inflammatory fold. Alternatively, the incisions may be made around the areola or in the armpit.

Breast implants

A breast implant is made of an outer layer of silicone, but may be filled with silicone gel or salt water. Some implants are round and others are shaped more like a natural breast. Either can give excellent results. The manufacturer's life expectancy of breast implants is 10 or more years, although implants can stay in without problems for a much longer time.

Expectations and complications

The capsule which the body normally forms around the implant can become thickened and contracted. The newer designs of implants have features to reduce the likelihood of this happening. This occurs to some extent in around 5-7% of patients and usually starts six or more months after the surgery. This can lead to pain, and/or an abnormally hard feel of the implant in the breast. Treatment may be needed and occasionally removal of the implant.

Implants do interfere in mammography, which is a screening method for breast cancer. Special X-ray views can be taken to minimize the interference.

Most women have some degree of asymmetry between breasts and breast augmentation may occasionally exaggerate this difference. Implanted breasts will not necessarily feel like a normal breast, and some women may be acutely aware of the implant as a foreign body within the breast. There is usually a difference in skin and nipple sensation following breast augmentation.

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Breast size and shape usually change with time. This may not be predictable. The weight of the implant may influence the age-related changes that normally take place in breasts. Movement of the fluid which fills the implant may occasionally be seen through the skin, this being more likely in the saline (salt water) filled implants, and less likely in the more viscous silicone implants, which also have a more natural feel.

Breast augmentation will always leave scars on the breast or in the armpit, and although the scars will settle over 12 or more months, the appearance of the scars does vary between different individuals. This scarring is placed in such a position as to minimize visibility even when wearing a swimming costume.

Complications that occur with breast augmentation include those associated with all forms of surgery, as well as the specific problems of bleeding and infection. Any infection that may occur in the tissue around the implant can usually be treated with antibiotics, but may require surgical removal of the implant.

Useful web sites

DOH advice

Breast implants MHRA

Breast implants IRG

BAPRAS