

Clothing Options for Breast Cancer Survivors

We can experience physical changes throughout our lives - puberty, pregnancy, menopause. Ideally we can go through each stage feeling confident with ourselves, and comfortable in our bodies. Part of this journey is finding the clothing that enhances our bodies, fits our souls, and allows us to reach our goals.

For women who have come through chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery, the body can experience even more changes, requiring a style re-assessment to look and feel great.

Fortunately there seems to be no limitations in fashions for those who have emerged from a mastectomy, if they wish to use a prosthesis.

The foundation garment

The most important start is the foundation garment. Beautiful bras and camisoles in a myriad of colours, styles and textures allow women the same versatility they are accustomed to, whether it's sexy, sporty, or sophisticated. The pockets for breast inserts or forms can be either used or ignored, depending on whether the surgery was single or bi-lateral. Mastectomy bras do not usually have underwires, as the wire can poke into the skin.

Dianne of Dianne's Mastectomy, a supplier of post-surgical needs located in Brampton (www.diannesmastectomy.com), has been fitting women for 25 years. According to Diane, the most popular item is the Amoena camisole. "I recommend that women get their cami prior to surgery, so that they can wear it home from the hospital". The drain tube and collection pouch that are necessary for 5 – 10 days post-surgery can often pose a problem with clothing. The Amoena camisole has a removable pocket on the inside for the collection pouch.

Lillian Weber of JSAW Mastectomy Designs in Brandon, Manitoba says that many of her clients prefer a camisole over a bra. “The bra tends to ride up where there is no natural breast; a camisole is not only more comfortable, but because it’s longer it stays in place.”

Fabrication

Many women are not able to lift up their arms to pull clothing over their head. They want to look for fabric that expands and allows them to step into the garment, and pull it up. As skin sensitivity is also an issue, the fabric should be comfortable, soft, and skin-friendly. Seams on the outside rather than on the inside keep from abrading the skin.

Styles

Most mastectomy clothing has a modest cut – the necklines are slightly higher to cover scars. Garments often have sleeves for those who have had lymph nodes removed. Sleeveless garments usually have a higher armhole cut.

Camisoles, swimwear, and activewear such as tank tops and t-shirts are made with pockets for breast prostheses.

Compression Garments

When lymph nodes are removed or damaged through radiation or cancer, a build-up of lymph may occur, known as lymphedema. Compression garments are designed to improve blood circulation, decrease swelling, and improve healing. In the case of reconstructive surgery, a full-length compression bra may be required. Compression items include sleeves, stockings, socks, abdominal wraps, and girdles.

Accessories

Breast forms come in a variety of colours, shapes, and sizes – with a nipple or without.

Breast form pockets are sold separately, and can be inserted into most garments.

Alternate Options

Women who choose to forego a prosthesis still have choice. Asymmetrical designs can create visual balance for women who have had a single mastectomy. A top with ruffles on one side, a scarf over one shoulder, or a pattern on the affected side, can give the illusion of balance. For a bi-lateral mastectomy, a loose shirt in a crisp fabric will not draw attention.

Choice

Whatever your lifestyle or personal style, you have choice. Wear colours that enhance your personal colouring and styles that flatter your figure. Develop a wardrobe that is functional, comfortable, and current and that allows you to look and feel fabulous.

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