

Breast cancer patients upbeat on body changes

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Micrograph showing a lymph node invaded by ductal breast carcinoma, with extension of the tumour beyond the lymph node. Credit: Nephron/Wikipedia

Body image identity varies among women who have undergone treatment for breast cancer with many rejecting mainstream body shape ideals, research shows.

A new study published in the *Journal of Health Psychology* reveals [younger women](#)'s experience of mastectomy - partial or full removal of the breast - and the impact on how they felt about their bodies.

Interviews show that [women](#)'s body confidence was reduced following surgery but some women created new body ideals, rejecting mainstream concepts to become proud of operative scars.

Prior to surgery but after diagnosis, the main concern was one of survival with minimal worries around how they will look.

The study, conducted by researchers at Manchester Metropolitan University, questioned 49 women aged 29 to 53 who had undergone a mastectomy.

It is hoped the findings will help to better inform patients and healthcare professionals.

The research was conducted by body image psychologist Professor Sarah Grogan and Senior Lecturer Jayne Mechan, a ladieswear specialist.

Prof Grogan said: "Interviews revealed that aesthetics were less important than survival between diagnosis and mastectomy. Following mastectomy, women negotiated new body identities.

"Treatment effects which could not be hidden with clothing were significant concerns. However, impacts on body confidence varied, and some participants rejected mainstream body shape ideals and reported feeling proud of their scars."

Jayne added: "Younger women may feel happy with their bodies, including their scars. It is important not to assume that they will feel entirely negative.

"Some women reported developing increased strength and self-efficacy following surgery and rejected mainstream beauty ideals. In general, these young women saw their [body](#) changes more positively than has been reported in previous studies."

Recommendations from the study:

- Any interventions and post-mastectomy treatment need to ensure that concerns about weight gain, as a result of treatment, are discussed as well as impacts of breast loss
- At diagnosis, younger women may feel they have no choice about whether or not to have a [mastectomy](#) as they are likely to want to focus on survival. This needs to be taken into account by consultants in pre-operative discussions, to ensure that women are given all necessary information and sufficient time and space to consider all options carefully, especially the decision about whether to have immediate reconstruction
- One of the key findings in this study was the degree of variability in women's experiences and feelings about their bodies. It is therefore important that health professionals do not expect homogenous patterns of negative responses in women who have had mastectomies, so that they are able to provide tailored support if and when needed

More information: S. Grogan et al. Body image after mastectomy: A thematic analysis of younger womens written accounts, *Journal of Health Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/1359105316630137](https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105316630137)

Provided by Manchester Metropolitan University

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