

Prosthesis and bra fitting after breast cancer surgery

This article aims to explain the options available to woman when choosing a breast prosthesis and specialist bra fitting after surgery. Some women who choose a mastectomy (complete removal of the breast) decide on reconstructive surgery after a mastectomy, but many choose breast prosthesis.

Many women do not realise their full entitlements in relation to prostheses and fitting. LARCC is the local provider of prostheses and bra fitting after breast surgery and they provide a special fitting service in Multyfarnham and have recently extended this service to Mullingar by offering a monthly clinic in Whelehan's pharmacy in Mullingar.

A breast prosthesis explained

A breast prosthesis is an artificial breast which is worn after the mastectomy. It helps balance the body and allows a bra to fit naturally on the side of the mastectomy and prevents potential problems such as back and neck pain and shoulder sagging downwards which can lead to aches and pains. Breast prostheses are custom-designed and are fitted by specialists. In Westmeath, LARCC provide a specialist prosthesis and bra fitting service for women who have undergone breast surgery. LARCC provide this service in their base in Multyfarnham and have recently extended this service to Whelehan's Pharmacy in Mullingar. Prostheses consist of a number of different types of material including silicone gel, foam, and fiberfill. They are designed to be similar weight, texture and feel to natural breast tissue. Depending on the type of surgery and the preference of the woman, a prosthesis can adhere directly to the chest, while some fit into pockets of mastectomy bras that hold the prosthesis in place. Permanent breast prostheses are made of silicone gel and are designed to feel soft and smooth. The surface of the prostheses can have an artificial nipple or a specific shape depending on your shape prior to surgery and preferences.

Types of prosthetic devices

External silicone breast prosthesis. This type of prosthesis is composed of silicone and aims to be similar in texture and weight to natural breast tissue. It is designed to prevent problems such as shoulder drop and poor balance.

Non-silicone breast prosthesis. This prosthesis is made of light-weight foam or fiberfill meaning that it can be worn soon after a mastectomy. The light weight means it is convenient to be worn during exercise, swimming and in hotter weather.

Postsurgical soft-form camisole. A postsurgical camisole is designed to be worn immediately after surgery and is often a temporary solution until a more permanent prosthesis is fitted. It is made of a soft and stretchy type material with lace elastic straps. A lightweight and removable breast material can be placed into the pocket of the camisole. It can be worn soon after a mastectomy (full breast removal), lumpectomy (removal of the tumor and tissue surrounding the tumor) or reconstructive breast surgery. It may be the best option immediately after radiation

therapy to the chest as radiation therapy can leave the skin sensitive and sore for a while.

Self- supporting prosthesis. This is an attachable breast that adheres to the chest wall by using adhesive strips. This type of prosthesis suits some women better; especially women who are very active. Some women reckon these prostheses feel more natural and secure than types that simply fit into a bra cup. However, if this type of prosthesis is chosen, you still need to wear a bra that fits well and that gives you and the prosthesis good support.

Partial breast prosthesis. Also known as an equaliser or enhancer is designed to be worn over your own breast tissue to create a fuller and natural appearance after part of the breast has been removed (eg) lumpectomy. This type of prosthesis can be made of silicone, foam or fiberfill.

Fitting of a prosthesis

It can take between four to eight weeks for complete healing from surgery. Only after this time can you be fitted for a prosthesis. Specialist mastectomy fitters such as LARCC carry prostheses, post-mastectomy bras, swimsuits, and camisoles with specialist fitters trained to fit women for breast prostheses and bras. At the first fitting appointment, you will be advised to wear a form-fitting top, such as a fitted T-shirt, so you can see how the shape and size of the breast form compares to your other breast and compares to what your shape was prior to surgery. You may also want to take a favourite bra or a low-fitting dress that you still hope to wear. You may like to bring your partner or friend along to the fitting to give you support and to offer their opinion. Nowadays, with professional fitting services and modern designs and material, prosthesis will not be noticeable. LARCC confidential fitting service provides women with access to a comprehensive range of products and clothing through the support of qualified consultant fitters in a purpose built private consultation room. LARCC's fitting service is available in Multyfarnham and has recently been extended to Whelehan's pharmacy in Mullingar.

Looking after the prosthesis

Most prostheses should be washed daily with warm soapy water and dried by lightly patting with a towel. Always keep your prosthesis in its original box when not wearing it to prevent damage. Prostheses generally last for two years once the instructions have been followed, but many last longer. Generally post-mastectomy bras need to be replaced every three months.

Do you have to pay for a prosthesis?

All women in Ireland who have undergone breast cancer surgery are entitled to their first prosthesis and two bras free of charge.

Medical Card holders

Medical card holders can get their prosthesis replaced when it is showing signs of

damage or wear and tear or if it needs replacing due to weight gain or weight loss. Medical card holders are entitled to two bras every year and one breast prosthesis every 2 years. To avail of this, you must get a prescription from your GP. This prescription must be brought to your local health centre who then sends you an official order form once they process your prescription. This order can be brought to an official and registered supplier like LARCC who will organise fitting etc. If unsure of what to do, call LARCC at Lo Call 1850 719 719 for advice.

Private patients

Some health insurance policies reimburse patients for prostheses, bras and swimwear every year. Other health insurance policies will cover a percentage of the prostheses costs. Check your health insurance policy to find out what is covered and how to submit claims. All necessary medical expenses including the likes of prostheses and specialist bras can be claimed against tax; ask in Whelehan's pharmacy for a *Med1* form to claim medical expenses against tax or download one from www.revenue.ie or call Revenue at 1890 306 706. If you are experiencing financial hardship due to cancer diagnosis, you can apply to the Irish Cancer Society for a financial aid grant. The application forms can be obtained from a social worker or oncology nurse at the hospital where you undergo treatment. You can call the Irish Cancer Society at Freephone 1800 200 700. Again LARCC can help you with this process.

Why choose a breast prosthesis?

Choosing to wear a breast prosthesis is a personal decision. As well as giving you confidence by allowing you have the same shape as prior to your surgery, a prosthesis offers other advantages. Breast prosthesis protects your chest and surgical scars from friction and injury. It prevents your bra from shifting side to side or shifting up. It helps your balance and posture which in turn prevents problems with curvature of your spine, shoulder sag and muscular pain in the neck and back.

Disclaimer: Information given is general only; Consult with LARCC or your healthcare professional for more information

For specific advice and information on breast prosthesis and bra fitting post breast surgery, contact LARCC at 1890 719 719 or Whelehan's Pharmacy at 04493 34591