

# Take the Weight Off Your Shoulders

By Jeffrey S. Poulter, M.D., FACS

Breast care is a significant focus in women's health. Gone are the days of putting our heads in the sand if a lump is felt. Thankfully, education and improved treatment has led to a decrease in the mortality of breast cancer. An often overlooked breast health issue that is not deadly, but can lead to significant disability is that of having disproportionately large breasts.

Greatly enlarged breasts, also known as breast hypertrophy, can lead to neck, back and shoulder pain. This continual pain can be disabling, preventing women from participating in activities of daily living. Many times the large size of a woman's breasts makes it painful to exercise. We all know how important regular exercise is to a person's overall health. The discomfort endured when exercising makes it more difficult to stay healthy and lose excess weight that may exacerbate the problem.

Abnormally large breasts almost always cause chronic headaches from the unending neck and upper back pain. Rashes and skin infections are another common complaint. The large area of the breast that lies against the chest wall creates a warm moist environment leading to rashes that are unresponsive to medical treatment. Numbness of the little finger can be related to the traction the breast places on the nerves to the arm and hand. Added to this is the emotional toll many women experience from a lifetime of embarrassment and poor self-image.

Some causes of breast hypertrophy include changes associated with child bearing that do not resolve at the completion of the



pregnancy and breast-feeding. A very few patients have hypertrophy at a very early age and develop greatly enlarged breasts in response to hormonal stimulation. There are some medical issues for some girls before, during, and after puberty that cause breast enlargement. However, the most common cause of breast hypertrophy is "idiopathic" – or otherwise stated, just the way God made you.

Breast reduction surgery almost always gives immediate relief of these symptoms. Many breast reduction candidates are teenagers because this is the point where the larger breasts become difficult for active young women and interferes with their ability to look and dress like their peers. However, there are certain limitations that apply to teenagers. Peri-operative pain is minimized by use of the pain pump. With an improved shape and size, women are able to fully participate in daily activities, wear clothing that fits without safety pins between

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the buttons, participate in sports and exercise without pain, and obtain relief from the daily neck, back and shoulder pain that can be debilitating.

Women who have undergone breast reduction surgery are overwhelmingly pleased and satisfied with the results. They not only get the shape and size they could only dream of, but also relief of their symptoms. Most, if not all, breast reduction procedures are covered by insurance. However, there is an important distinction between simply having large breasts and having abnormally large breasts that can be classified as breast hypertrophy.

There is an article in March 2009 Health magazine<sup>1</sup> that includes everything I would want you to know regarding breast reduction. The author, Brannon Dawkins, does an excellent job describing her experience with breast reduction that has made her feel good about herself again. And after all, isn't that what good health is all about?

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1. [www.health.com](http://www.health.com), March 2009, page 77