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## **Oversized Male Breasts: Not an Uncommon Problem**

By David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS

Gynecomastia is a medical term that originates from the Greek words for "women-like breasts." The condition often results in embarrassment, teasing, and social trauma, especially for teens and younger men, leading many to wear heavy, loose-fitting shirts and avoid sports and bare-chested activities.

Sufferers may find some comfort in the fact that they are not alone. Gynecomastia is present in an estimated 40 to 60 percent of the male population. It may affect only one breast or both. Certain drugs, such as anabolic steroids, medications containing estrogen, alcohol and marijuana, may cause or contribute to enlarged male breasts. So might some medical conditions including cancer and impaired liver function. However, it is widely accepted in the medical community that a large percentage of cases occur for unknown reasons.

Excess fat or glandular tissue, especially along the lower breast, are the culprits, creating a "female" contour. Diet and exercise can help with generalized fat, but cannot be directed to the specific shape of the chest fat. Neither diet nor exercise will help reduce excess glandular tissue. Indeed, as muscle beneath the breast is built up as with chest exercises, the overlying fat and glandular tissue is pushed further forward and may become more noticeable.

The best candidates for male breast reduction are those who have firm, elastic skin that will reshape to the body's new contours. The procedure is appropriate for men of any age who are otherwise healthy. In the case of teens, surgery should be postponed until the individual is past puberty and mature enough physically and emotionally to handle it, usually by 16 or 17. Even then, the condition often resolves itself without surgical treatment by age 18 or 19, so patients are well advised to wait until then, unless the gynecomastia is causing major emotional trauma. A free consultation with a plastic surgeon can give both the patient and his parents the guidance they need to make an informed decision.

Depending on the nature and extent of the gynecomastia, enlarged male breasts can be reduced by liposuction and/or by cutting out excess glandular tissue and/or skin. The procedure typically takes an average of two hours, usually on an outpatient basis, using general or local anesthesia.

If deposits of excess fatty tissue, and are causing the enlargement not by excess skin and glandular tissue, liposuction alone may resolve the problem. Tiny incisions are made near the nipple, fat is suctioned out through a very narrow canula (tube). In such cases, scars will be small and barely visible. Results are permanent, although subsequent obesity can recreate a gynecomastia-like effect.

If the problem is being caused not just by fatty deposits but by excess glandular mass as well, the excess tissue is removed through an incision at the lower edge of the areola. This sometimes causes a crater effect and must be contoured carefully, usually along with liposuction of the surrounding fat. In rare cases of excess skin, incisions are made beneath around and beneath the areola as with a female breast lift or reduction.

There is little downtime after this procedure and patients typically return to work within one week, unless the work is extremely strenuous. There will be scarring around the nipple but it will fade over time. There will be some post-operative bruising, swelling, and burning sensation. To assist with the healing process, the patient will wear an elastic pressure garment for 3-6 weeks and must avoid exposing scarred areas to the sun for at least 6 months.

Some patients also experience temporary numbness or lack of sensation in the breast area that can last up to a year. Infrequent complications, associated with many surgical procedures, include possible infection, skin damage, fluid accumulation, bleeding, scarring or pigment changes. Post-operative asymmetry, while rare, is possible. When that occurs, a second procedure may be needed to remove additional tissue and create better balance.

Post-recovery, the patient enjoys a firmer, flatter, more contoured chest which fits the standard "male profile". Subsequent exercise to tone the breast muscles will produce even greater improvement.

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