



Control Point 5

If I Have a Mastectomy, Can I Wear an External Prosthesis?

Control Point #5



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If you don't have a reconstruction, getting a breast prosthesis is a good idea. This can be challenging at times and depends on how much support and information you get after your operation. The best people to talk to about a prosthesis are your discharge planner, social worker, or breast care nurse. Wearing an external prosthesis may help with your balance, symmetry, self-esteem and confidence.

What is a breast prosthesis?

A [breast prosthesis](#) is essentially an external, artificial breast shape or mound worn inside your bra or swimsuit. It's sometimes referred to as an external breast form. It is not an internal breast prosthesis or [implant](#). Many women feel quite self-conscious after a mastectomy, because they may appear lopsided in clothes. A prosthesis can be temporary (usually lightweight) or permanent (weighted or lightweight) and some are suitable for active sports including swimming. All breast prostheses come in various skin tones and may be made from silicone or lighter materials.

What types of breast prostheses are available?

Ruth Handler (1916–2002) was an American businesswoman and president of the toy manufacturer Mattel, Inc., who is remembered primarily for her role in creating and marketing the BARBIE® doll ([Figure 5.1](#)). In the '70s, after having a mastectomy, she was not impressed with the quality of prostheses and started a company that produced the original NEARLY ME® line of breast prostheses. You'll probably want to buy two types of breast prostheses: a non-weighted and a weighted one.



Figure 5.1: Ruth Handler, inventor of BARBIE® Doll and founder and creator of the original NEARLY ME® line of Breast Prostheses.

A non-weighted foam or polyfill form is recommended when you're first recovering from surgery because it's softer and most comfortable over your healing skin ([Figure 5.2](#)). At the Institute where I work, we give these out for free. They're made by a local Zonta Club (www.Zonta.org), a part of Zonta International whose aim is to advance the status of women. Soft prostheses are also useful for informal leisure activities and feel good during warm weather and while swimming. They're conveniently

machine-washable and lightweight. In different countries they may be called “comfies”, “softies,” “falsies” or a “filler.” You may find that the soft-form prosthesis can “ride up” because it’s so light. It may look better if you adjust the stuffing and pin it to the bottom of your bra cup. If you want to wear a bra with your soft prosthesis, try one that is soft and stretchy, without an underwire. Remember, your first bra after a mastectomy has to be easy to take on and off because your shoulder may be stiff at first if you have had surgery on your lymph nodes.



Figure 5.2: A soft-form or lightweight prosthesis.

Weighted silicone prostheses are still very soft but add the weight and balance that you need to reduce the potential for neck and back problems. They are hand-washable and look and feel better than soft prostheses because they’re fitted to match the size, weight, and shape of your own breast. These too are worn externally and are not the same as breast implants. The added weight of a silicone prosthesis usually allows it to sit more easily at the same level as your other breast. If a silicone prosthesis “rides up,” it might not be heavy enough.

After breast surgery, and also after radiation therapy, your chest area can be extra sensitive, so it’s best to delay getting a silicone prosthesis until your chest area is fully healed after surgery, which generally takes about eight weeks. If you are having radiation treatment to the chest wall, wait at least six to eight weeks after it’s completed and any skin reaction has settled.

You might want to ask your fitting service for a reassessment if you’re not happy with how your prosthesis fits you. You really need to talk to your team about the style of your prosthesis, but the options include:

- Asymmetrical prostheses, often called classic style. One designed only for the left side and one only for the right side extend into the armpit ([Figure 5.3](#), right).

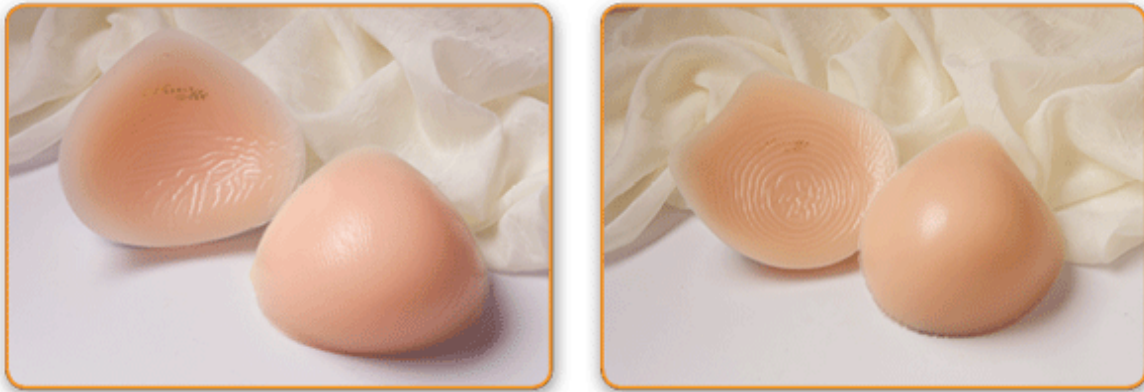


Figure 5.3: Soft silicone gel prostheses—(left) triangle (symmetrical), and (right) classical (asymmetrical).

- Symmetrical prostheses include the “pear shape” (also known as teardrop or oval prosthesis or the “triangle shape”). The pear shape prostheses work on either side and can be worn sideways filling the area towards your arm, or straight up for center fullness and cleavage. Triangles, which are very popular, have been on the market since the early to mid-1990s and come in a large variety of shapes, skin tones, and weights that allow the fit to be more customized to your body shape and size ([Figure 5.3](#), left).

A silicone prosthesis can be heavy, especially for larger-breasted women, and you may find it tiring. But the balanced weight it provides helps to keep your shoulders even and your posture straight. This makes it easier on your neck and shoulder.

Prices for silicone prostheses range from under \$100 to about \$500 for high-quality products. For public (uninsured) patients in Australia and the UK, prostheses are free, at least for the first one. In the US, some states govern that insurance companies need to provide at least some reimbursement. Check with your insurer or government program to learn what help is available to you. Many private insurance companies pay for a breast prosthesis and a bra. In the US, Medicare will not pay for any bra unless it has a built in pocket produced at the manufacturer. Medicare allows one silicone breast prosthesis form every two years based on medical necessity. Six mastectomy bras every year are also usually allowed. Medicare usually pays for a camisole immediately following surgery, and one lightweight form every six months is normally covered.

In Australia, from 1 July 2008, an external prosthesis is reimbursable up to \$A800 every two years for two sides or \$400 for one side. For more information see:

www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/medicare/external-breast-prostheses-reimbursement-program

Smaller prostheses for women who have had breast conservation surgery are available. These may be worn inside the bra and are shaped to fill out a small part of the breast ([Figure 5.4](#)). They are made of the same silicone material as most full-breast prostheses. Some have a stick-on backing.



Figure 5.4: A smaller partial prosthesis, sometimes useful after breast conservation.

Nipples can be added to prostheses if required ([Figure 5.5](#)). Swimsuits and lingerie designed for women who have had mastectomies are available by catalog from Lands' End, Sears, Nordstrom, and JC Penney in the USA; and Myer and David Jones in Australia; as well as in small shops and department stores in several countries. The clothing comes with a pocket to hold the prosthesis. You can also have pockets sewn into the bras or swimsuits you already own.

You should be able to wear a normal bra with a prosthesis. The bra should fit well and offer medium to firm control. You could get a pocket sewn into your bra or sew two ribbons across the inside to hold the prosthesis. Wearing a soft cotton bra that opens at the front with a soft-form prosthesis is a good way to start, particularly if your arm is restricted after surgery to the armpit ([Figure 5.6](#)).



Figure 5.5 (left): An example of a breast prosthesis with optional stick-on nipple.

Figure 5.6 (right): Front-closing cotton bras with pockets are best just after your surgery and during radiotherapy.

These bras, available from most major manufacturers who specialize in post-breast surgery products, have pockets in both cups to fit a soft-form prosthesis. The soft cotton helps with any discomfort associated with your scar. They are also very good during radiotherapy not only because you can get them off quickly for your daily treatment but also because these bras are relatively inexpensive so it's no problem if you get any of the skin marks from your radiotherapy on the bra.



Figure 5.7: Specialized swimwear with adjustable shoulder straps and a special bust with pockets on both sides to allow a breast prosthesis

There are also some very practical and attractive bras and swimwear that are designed to hold a prosthesis ([Figures 5.7](#) and [5.8](#)). Make sure you get an appointment for a fitting for your prosthesis. Don't be rushed into making your choice.

Look at and try on as many as possible and be sure that the one you buy comes with a 12-month warranty. When you go for a fitting, take a shirt, blouse, and/or T-shirt so that you can see the final result.

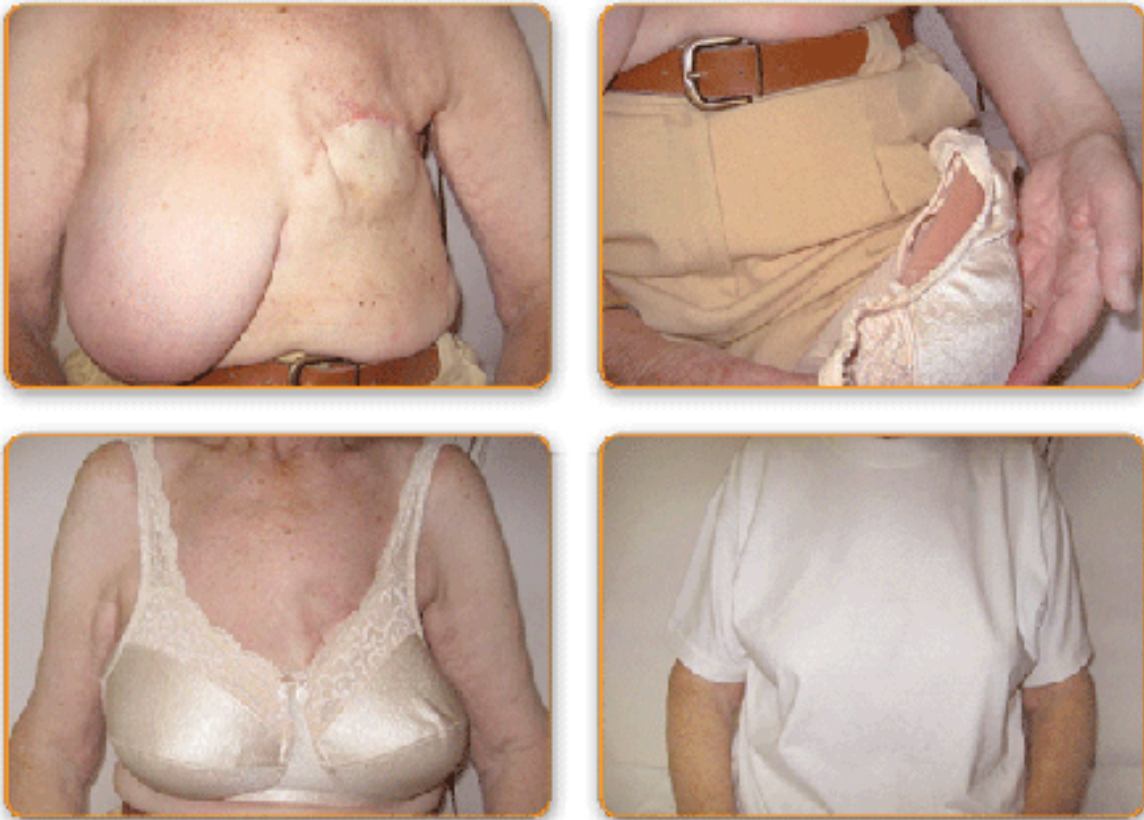


Figure 5.8: Use of an external breast prosthesis inserted into a custom bra slip.

Check that the prosthesis fills your bra cup at both the top and the bottom. A softer silicone prosthesis will give a more natural shape. Stand upright and check in the mirror for shape and a good match to your natural breast. Swing your arms back and forth to check that the form is not too full under your arm.

Care of your prosthesis

Most prostheses, properly cared for, last two to three years. Ensure that you:

- Hand wash your prosthesis regularly, preferably daily
- Store the prosthesis in the box it came in to help it keep its shape

- Avoid wearing a silicone-filled prosthesis in a saltwater or chlorinated pool or in a heated sauna or spa, as it may heat up against your skin

The ideal bra after a mastectomy

The Breast Cancer Care Organization in the UK has published some excellent guidelines called “A Confident Choice, Breast Prostheses, Bras And Clothes—Tips And Advice After Surgery.” They state that a proper bra should have:

- Full cups to cover the prosthesis
- At least two hooks to fasten at the back (more in larger sizes)
- Good separation between the cups, which should not be too low
- Good depth under the arm with a lower cut to avoid rubbing and an under-band (below cups) at least 10 mm deep
- A firm or elasticized upper edge to the cups and good straps.

Also look for a bra that is wider under the arm so there is greater support around the back and to cover any scars or areas of puckering around your scar.

At first, it’s a good idea to buy just one bra (or at most two bras), in case it turns out to be unsuitable—for example, if it’s not comfortable or the cup doesn’t cover the prosthesis well enough, or in case your bra size changes with changes in your weight as a result of your treatment. You could keep the bra in its packaging until you have your prosthesis fitting so that you can change it if you need to.

Judi Simon, President and CEO of Nearly Me Technologies, Inc., said: “The longevity of any bra, fashion or mastectomy, is only 16 washings. Because of the use of synthetic fibers, all bras lose their elasticity and support after that amount of wear. This seems to be standard across the lingerie. Also, hand washing versus machine washing and drying prolongs the life of the garment. We always recommend to our patients that they purchase at least three bras at a time (one in the wash, one to wear, and one as a spare). Also, it is highly recommended that they go back to their fitter every six months, since if they gain or lose even ten pounds, it will change the look and weight of the remaining natural breast and therefore how the prosthesis fits and mimics their body.”

CONTROL POINT #5– IF I HAVE A MASTECTOMY, CAN I WEAR AN EXTERNAL PROSTHESIS?

WARNING



After breast surgery, and also after radiation therapy, your chest area can be extra sensitive, so it's best to delay getting an external silicone prosthesis until about eight weeks after treatment is completed.

TIP



Wearing a soft cotton bra that opens at the front with a soft-form prosthesis is a good way to start after your surgery, particularly if your arm is restricted or you are having radiation therapy.

REMEMBER



Talk to your bra and prosthesis fitter or breast care nurse about your options for a bra or prosthesis sooner rather than later after your surgery.