

From Boyhood, He Carried a Burden on His Chest

By *Adam Voiland*

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When Merle Yost was a boy, he developed the condition known as [gynecomastia](#). He lived with enlarged breasts for more than two decades and then had plastic surgery to reduce their size. Yost, a California psychotherapist who maintains [gynecomastia.org](#), is the author of the book *Demystifying Gynecomastia*. He spoke with *U.S. News* on how to cope with the condition.

What was your experience with gynecomastia?

I developed it when I was 10 or 11 years old. It was rather substantial gynecomastia that did not go away. I was a skinny little boy with [breasts] who got taunted for having [breasts] in school. Girls offered their bras. Boys played with my chest. And, of course, I always ended up on the skins teams. I spent the next 20 years or so wearing large, bulky shirts to hide my chest. When I was 33, I had breast reduction surgery.

What caused you to develop breasts?

I have a genetic predisposition. My dad has a lovely rack. And I inherited his body, for better or worse.

Body fat can contribute to enlarged breasts. Were you overweight?

Not at all. But a lot of guys do gain weight in order to hide them [because they feel] it's more justifiable for a guy who is fat to have [breasts] than a guy who is skinny.

As an author and therapist, you've discussed gynecomastia with a lot of people who have it. How does it tend to affect boys psychologically?

Adolescence is really an awful age. Boys at that age are becoming more aware of their bodies. They are becoming sexually aware. They're looking to see how they fit in or don't. And this is one thing that stands out and says, 'I'm different.' I've heard countless stories of guys [with

gynecomastia] who are suicidal, or completely depressed, or socially withdrawn.

How would you advise parents to react if a son develops breasts?

Get an appointment with an endocrinologist who deals with male issues. In and of itself, gynecomastia is not a pathology, but it's a sign that something is going on in the body. The liver might not be functioning right. The testis might not be functioning right. [Various conditions] that it could be indicative of should really be checked out by a doctor. Also, have some compassion, and understand this is a really difficult time in an adolescent's life. Forget the sarcasm and the humiliation, and it will go a long way towards helping them become an adult.

Could we all do a better job of understanding people with gynecomastia?

Sure. We need to educate coaches, teachers, doctors. Information about [gynecomastia] should be offered in health classes in school. This is really a common part of development. If we can demystify it and just make it a normal part of development, suddenly there isn't any space to have shame about it.

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