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Many men seek treatment for female-like breasts.

Many men seek treatment for gynecomastia – female-like breasts.

By **BLYTHE BERNHARD**
The Orange County Register

No matter how much John Barton worked out, or how thin he got, he couldn't get rid of the puffiness on his chest. Eventually the condition became annoying enough that he decided to take care of it with plastic surgery.

As many as one in three men experience a benign condition called gynecomastia - female-like breasts - at some point in their lives. The condition can be caused by an imbalance in the testosterone-to-estrogen hormone ratio, which results in abnormal breast growth in men.

"The more I read about it I realized you can't exercise that away. It's just there," Barton said.

The condition - which is not always associated with obesity - commonly develops during puberty but can also be brought on by genetics, prescription drugs or liver disease later in life.

Some men decide on drug treatments or plastic surgery. The breast-cancer drug Tamoxifen, an estrogen inhibitor, can be effective in reducing the effects of gynecomastia.

But the physical effects are not the only problem. For men who carry extra breast tissue, the condition can lead to embarrassment and low self-esteem. Having characteristics normally associated with the opposite sex can be devastating, men said.

Then there are the jokes, the funny nicknames and that "Seinfeld" episode dealing with bras for men.

"It doesn't appear very manly," said Barton, 55. "It plays on your self-image. I just didn't feel comfortable."

Message boards for men dealing with gynecomastia include topics such as chest-binding clothes, advice on surgeons and even dating tips. Some of the men post their pre- and post-surgery pictures.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: MICHAEL KITADA, THE REGISTER

Multimedia
[GRAPHIC: Solutions for gynecomastia](#)

Top 5 Cosmetic Surgeries for Men, 2004

- Nose reconstruction: 109,971
- Hair transplant: 43,054
- Eyelid surgery: 32,667
- Liposuction: 32,489
- Breast reduction: 13,963

Source: American Society of Plastic Surgeons

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Other guys just want support from people who know what it feels like.

"In adolescence, it can really (mess with) their minds. They're sort of discovering their bodies and to suddenly sprout breasts is not exactly what we're told to expect," said San Francisco psychotherapist Merle Yost, who founded www.gynecomastia.org and wrote the book "Bumps on the Road: Demystifying Male Gynecomastia."

"In adults, it depends how they feel about themselves. Some are going to ignore it and some are going to flip out."

For Barton, a computer- support technician from Lake Forest, surgery was the answer.

Breast reductions were the fifth most-common plastic surgery performed on men last year, with nearly 14,000 procedures nationwide. The procedure costs around \$5,000 and isn't covered by insurance.

After his surgery in 2003, Barton became more outgoing and felt confident wearing a T-shirt.

Barton began noticing the condition in his early 30s. He had always been slender, but his chest started to become uncomfortably disproportionate to the rest of his body.

By his 40s, Barton was caring more about his health and appearance, which eventually led to his decision to have breast-reduction surgery.

"I was trying to get healthier," Barton said. "I used to smoke and used to drink, up until I was 42. (The surgery) was part of a long chain of a health regimen."

Barton, who is single, said the condition never had an impact on his dating life, but after the surgery he felt less inhibited about his body.

"It wasn't about pleasing anyone," he said. "It made me feel better about myself."

While gynecomastia is usually benign, cancer must first be ruled out. About 1,700 men are diagnosed with breast cancer each year in the U.S.

"The next step is to find out why they have it, whether it's liver disease or a tumor that's producing estrogen," said Dr. Lauralyn Markle, medical director of the MemorialCare Breast Center at Saddleback Memorial Medical Center.

Gynecomastia may also be caused by steroids, marijuana, alcohol and some prescription medicines - including prostate-cancer drugs and antidepressants. Anything that affects the liver to a certain degree can lead to female characteristics in men, doctors said. Genetics can also be the cause in some cases.

For Chad, who declined to give his last name, the condition was painful and made his chest overly sensitive. The construction worker from Anaheim found that his extra breast tissue got in the way of his job, his social life and his psyche.

"I didn't like taking my shirt off because the look of it bothered me," said Chad, 34. "I would avoid going to the beach. It starts to wear on your nerves after a while, just thinking it would go away or get better."

Chad first noticed the condition at age 16 as he started to get more muscular. Somehow, his chest area could never get fully defined. He felt embarrassed, even depressed.

Always self-conscious, Chad tended to wear baggy clothes. This year, he was ready to take care of the problem.

His mom, Joanie, came with him to the surgery in October.

"He's very confident normally and yet this bothered him enough to do it," she said. "To me he looks great, but that's a mother's perspective."

Chad turned to Dr. Eugene Elliott for breast-reduction surgery at Orange Coast Memorial Medical Center. The Newport Beach plastic surgeon sees about two or three men a month with gynecomastia, he said.

"When you think of breast surgery, you don't think of men," Elliott said. "But it's relatively common in my practice."

Elliott said the men share a common lament, that gynecomastia makes them self-conscious at the beach and in the locker room.

"It's kind of a silent disability that really affects these men," he said. "Like any cosmetic aberration it has its psychological effects."

The surgery involves using liposuction to remove any excess fat. Then the surgeon cuts out the fibrous breast tissue, leaving some behind to form a natural-looking chest.

The outpatient procedure takes about two to three hours under general anesthesia. Recovery takes about a week, but final results are usually seen in about three months.

"It was painless and awesome," Chad said. "Everything looks good. I can't wait until summer comes around."

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