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BREAST AUGMENTATION (BREAST IMPLANTS)

Indications

Breast augmentation is most often performed for cosmetic breast enlargement. The procedure may be used to correct droopy breasts. Breast implants are also used for breast asymmetry, reconstruction following birth defects or after cancer operations.

Anaesthetic – General Anaesthetic

Technique

Implants consist of an outer silicone shell filled with salt water or silicone gel. Silicone gel may be a liquid or semi-solid (cohesive). Some implants are round others are breast shaped (anatomical). The implant can be placed under the breast or behind the muscle on which the breast sits. The implant is inserted via one of three incisions, under the breast (common), in the armpit or around the nipple. The surgeon makes a space for the implant, which is put in and the wound stitched up with dissolving stitches.

Length of Operation – 1½/2 hours (cosmetic augmentation)

Time in Hospital – Day case or overnight stay

Postoperative discomfort/limitations

Mild to moderate pain. A drainage tube may be used for 24 hours. Dressings are left 1-2 weeks. A sports bra should be worn continuously for 4 weeks. Augmented breasts may not feel like a normal breast, some women are aware of the implant even if it is not visible.

Implants filled with salt water have a less natural feel than silicone ones. Occasionally breast implants may exaggerate pre-existing breast asymmetry.

All breast implants have a limited life span, manufacturers suggest this is in the order of 10 years or more, however implants stay in place much longer without any problems.

Breast-feeding is not interfered with. Breast implants interfere with breast x-rays (mammograms). Special x-ray views can be taken to minimise this interference.

Risks and Complications

General complications: bruising, swelling and bleeding (which may be heavy, chest and wound infection, infection around a breast implant may need removal of the implant, unsatisfactory scarring, leg thrombosis (clot).

Silicone may leak from implants – this may be slow through an intact implant (“gel bleed”) or follow a tear in the implant. Often the silicone is contained in the capsule that the body forms around any implant, rarely silicone gets into the breast tissue or armpit lymph glands and forms noticeable lumps. Leakage of salt water implants leads to immediate loss of shape. With silicone filled implants leakage may not be apparent unless special scans are performed. The capsule around the implant may thicken and shrink (capsular contracture). Modern implants have a roughened surface, which reduces the frequency of this. Capsular contracture occurs with varying severity in 10% of women. The problem usually starts within the first year and in severe cases can distort the shape of the implanted breast, cause pain and make the breast feel abnormally firm. Surgical treatment may be needed for this problem and occasionally the implant may need removal. Changed nipple sensitivity, breast numbness, delayed wound healing may also occur.

Safety of Silicone

There has been controversy about silicone safety. Is silicone associated with diseases? eg: breast cancer, auto- immune diseases and other ill-defined problems such as muscular aches and pains, chronic fatigue and skin problems.

In the USA there has been a ban on cosmetic use of silicone breast implants since 1992. This is not the situation in the UK. Silicone implants have continued to be used because the UK government and its medical advisors did not feel that there was sufficient scientific evidence to support the concerns voiced in the United States. The British governments Chief Medical Officer set up the “Independent Review Group” (IRG) to look into concerns about silicone implants. The IRG report “Silicone Gel Breast Implants” was published in July 1998. The report is available on the Internet – www.silicone-review.gov.uk. The IRG considered the evidence and made several conclusions and recommendations. These are reproduced in the document “Conclusions of the IRG” and “Recommendations of the IRG”. In the United Kingdom the use of silicone breast implants continues with the belief that they are safe.

It is important to understand that any revision surgery needed for breast augmentation will not be carried out by the NHS.