

## PLASTIC SURGERY

### Holistic breast cancer treatment

If a mastectomy or breast removal is required, you also have the option to reconstruct it – at one go.



**Dr Karen Sng**  
*Plastic Surgeon*

“**H**olistic treatment” refers to treatment of the whole person, including mental and social factors, rather than just the symptoms of the disease.

While some women may feel it does not matter if they have to lose their breast(s), for many other women it makes a difference to their self-esteem, feelings of femininity and relationships.

Beyond the shock of diagnosis, three breast cancer survivors speak about the impact of breast reconstruction on their lives. Names have been changed.



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**Zoe, aged 45**

“There was so much information to take in about treatment options, so many decisions, such as whether to have a partial or total mastectomy, and whether to have breast reconstruction.

“My mother had breast cancer and a mastectomy without reconstruction, and I know how she felt about it. It was like she had lost part of herself, and she was sad whenever she looked at her chest. Even now, she puts a small towel in her bra to hide the imbalance. I did not want to feel this way and decided on total mastectomy and breast reconstruction at the same surgery. My breast was reconstructed with tissue from my tummy. When I woke up, my ‘new’ breast was there. The early days of recovery were slow, but now when I look at myself, my breasts are the same size and my appearance is the same as before. The feel of my new breast is a little firmer, but I don’t have to put anything in my bra to feel balanced. I feel confident about myself and my appearance.

“It is really worthwhile to

do reconstruction. Nowadays women have this option; in the past, they didn’t. It is a vital part of breast cancer treatment... very effective for the morale.”

**Kerry, aged 47**

“The doctor said I needed to remove the whole breast and I was distressed about how I would look after surgery. I felt that losing a breast would make me look imbalanced. I felt that I would be sad and frustrated if I had to lose my breast because of the cancer. After discussion with my surgeons I decided on breast reconstruction using my own tissue to replace the lost breast.

“The recovery was a bit slow, but within a few months, I felt good, balanced and confident in my clothes. The shape and size of my new breast is like my normal breast. My new breast feels almost perfect and I am happy.

“Women who need to have a mastectomy should be aware and understand that breast reconstruction can make a good difference in our lives.”

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**Nicola, aged 40**

“I was diagnosed with breast cancer on one side. I have the BRCA gene, which puts me at high risk of cancer in both breasts. I was not really surprised – my mother also had breast cancer and had a double mastectomy with no reconstruction. I grew up looking at her “mutilated chest”; it never horrified me because I didn’t know any better.

“Initially, I didn’t think I would want to have reconstruction. But I changed my mind for my daughter and family; and since I am still young, I decided not to pass on the opportunity to keep my femininity.

“I had my reconstruction with implants. The recovery was challenging for the first week, as I had to get used to the new ‘feel’ of the breasts. The look of this new chest was unsettling at the beginning as the breast size and appearance were somewhat different from before. Luckily my support system at home was fantastic and that made a huge difference in the recovery process.

“It has been several months since my surgery. I am getting more accustomed to my new breasts. The look and feel have improved. My chest looks more ‘natural’, despite the scars. I still struggle to ‘identify’ myself with this new look, but I will get there. It is still early days. In the meantime, under my clothes, I feel normal and feminine, and no one can tell I have implants.

A mastectomy followed by a reconstruction is certainly a



procedure I would encourage any woman in a similar situation to seriously consider.

However, at the end it is really an intimate choice as each of us has different aspirations. Strong family support, a trustworthy and patient medical team and some personal research will definitely help ease the fear, doubt and apprehension. And yes, as a woman, the sight of breasts, even ‘fake’ ones, empowers one for her life after cancer. It is undeniably a booster for a new start, a ‘reconstruction.’”

A woman’s breasts are an important part of her body, one of the symbols of her femininity. Holistic treatment not only involves treating the cancer, but reconstructing what is removed, so that a woman does not have to feel imbalanced or disfigured, and can remain ‘complete’ even though she may have had a breast removed.

Modern techniques enable plastic surgeons to reconstruct a new breast to ‘replace’ the cancerous breast. This can be done immediately after the breast removal (together as one surgery), or can be done months or years later.

There are different ways to do breast reconstruction, namely, by using ‘flesh’ from the patient’s own body, using a breast implant, fat grafts or a combination of procedures.

It all depends on the patient’s body, lifestyle and the cancer. Speak to a plastic surgeon who will be able to advise what is best suited for you, since every individual is different.

