



Dr. Constance Chen

# Breast Reconstruction after Mastectomy

## Is Natural Tissue Breast Reconstruction the Right Choice for You?

by Constance M. Chen, MD

For most women, the goal of breast reconstruction is to create a natural breast with the shape, softness, and symmetry of the original. If a woman's breast reconstruction is subpar, she may be unhappy with the way her breasts look or feel. To achieve the best results, breast reconstruction after mastectomy should be viewed as a process rather than a single procedure.

It is common for women to experience problems with implants, which can generally be resolved with additional surgery. Even with an ideal breast reconstruction, small follow-up adjustments can help improve results. Many issues with size, shape, and symmetry after the initial reconstruction can later be corrected to help a woman's breasts look more natural again, and these rehabilitative procedures are usually covered by insurance.

**Implant Placement** The majority of women who undergo breast reconstruction have the implants placed underneath their pectoralis muscles, called *subpectoral breast implants*. For some women, this placement can cause complications that require further surgery. Implants under the chest wall muscles can also feel tight and uncomfortable. The simplest way to eliminate this discomfort is to have breast implants placed above the muscle, directly beneath the skin, in the same anatomical location as the original breasts. This is called a *prepectoral breast implant*.

**Natural Tissue Breast Reconstruction** Advanced microsurgical techniques that transfer fat and skin from the lower abdomen or inner thighs to the chest wall can create reconstructed breasts that look and feel more natural. Nerves can be reconnected to restore sensation, and the new living breasts will grow and

shrink as a woman gains and loses weight. This is called *natural tissue breast reconstruction*. While natural tissue breast reconstruction involves more complex surgery, the woman's own tissue can be custom-molded and shaped to look and feel similar to her pre-cancer breasts.

With the right surgeon, even very thin women are candidates, and donor site scars are similar to those from a tummy tuck or thigh lift. Natural tissue breast reconstruction can be done at the

Advanced microsurgical techniques that transfer fat and skin from the lower abdomen or inner thighs to the chest wall can create reconstructed breasts that look and feel more natural.

same time as a mastectomy (*immediate reconstruction*) or later (*delayed reconstruction*). In addition, women who have already undergone reconstruction with implants can replace their breast implants with natural tissue.

**Nipple-Sparing Surgery** For women who have not yet undergone mastectomy, finding a breast surgeon who can perform a nipple-sparing mastectomy sets

a woman up for the best possible breast reconstruction. The combination of nipple-sparing mastectomy and natural tissue breast reconstruction can create breasts that are essentially indistinguishable from natural breasts. Even if a woman has not had nipple-sparing mastectomy, she can still undergo nipple reconstruction to recreate nipples that look real.

**Symmetry** Finally, breasts come as a pair, but asymmetry is a frequent problem – especially when mastectomy and reconstruction is done on only one breast. If two breasts are vastly different in size, then a breast reduction, a breast lift, or a breast augmentation can help the unaffected breast match the reconstructed breast. If there are only slight contour differences between two similar breasts, then one or both breasts can be fat grafted to help sculpt and fill in small areas.

**Choosing What Is Best for You** At the end of the day, women undergoing breast reconstruction need to know themselves and their goals. Take some time, if you are able, to research your options so you can figure out what is right for you. Don't let the first surgeon you meet tell you what to do. You can – and should – seek out a second opinion. As a woman, you have agency over your own body.

*Dr. Constance Chen is a board-certified plastic surgeon in New York, NY, and clinical assistant professor of Surgery (Plastic Surgery) at both Weill Cornell Medical College and Tulane University School of Medicine. You can learn more about Dr. Chen at ConstanceChenMD.com.*

Breast reconstruction following a mastectomy or lumpectomy is not for every woman, but every woman should be informed of her options. For more information about postmastectomy breast reconstruction, visit [plasticsurgery.org](http://plasticsurgery.org).