Patient Education for Women Being Fitted for Breast Prostheses

Suzanne M. Mahon, RN, DNSc, AOCN®, APNG, and Michelle Casey, CFS

Each year, more than 212,600 women are diagnosed with breast cancer (Jemal et al., 2003). Most of these women will undergo a surgical procedure (e.g., lumpectomy, mastectomy). Although statistics are not available, many more women have surgical biopsies, some of which result in significant disparity in breast size.

Issues related to breast surgery and body image often are discussed in nursing and medical literature (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 1998; Rees & Bath, 2000). Adjustment to changes or disturbances in body image contribute to the quality of life in people who are diagnosed with cancer (Wang, Cosby, Harris, & Liu, 1999). Nurses who provide education and information about breast restoration (by using a prosthesis or through reconstruction) ultimately can help to improve the quality of life of breast cancer survivors.

The concept of body image has several dimensions. Cohen et al. (1998) noted that body image includes not only the mental picture of the physical self, but also who people believe they are and how they feel about themselves. When women look in the mirror and perceive themselves to be attractive, they can be more confident. Breast restoration also helps remove the constant reminder that the women have faced a life-threatening diagnosis.

Women who undergo mastectomy or other types of breast surgery often will be fitted for breast prostheses for therapeutic weight replacement as well as cosmetic purposes. Nurses are instrumental in educating women about issues related to breast surgery and in helping to promote psychosocial adjustment to the diagnosis and subsequent treatment. Nurses often are involved in the referral process for breast prostheses. Prostheses and bras that fit properly can be very important in the recovery process and ultimately improve quality of life for cancer survivors. Unlike in the past, many choices are available today for women who opt to use breast prostheses. Prostheses come in different colors, shapes, and weights, and some adhere to the chest wall. Many options also are available for bras, camisoles, and swimsuits, which are helpful adjuncts to the fit of the prosthesis. The purpose of this article is to describe the fitting process and options currently available for breast prostheses. Nurses can use this information to inform women of available breast prostheses options and help prepare them for a fitting.

Key Words: breast neoplasms, mastectomy, prostheses, implants

The concept of body image is not a single event. As women’s bodies change because of treatment or the normal effects of aging on breast tissue and posture, different prostheses or bras might be needed. Nurses who care for women in long-term follow-up can facilitate ongoing adjustment to body image by encouraging women to be reevaluated and refitted when changes are needed.

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