

BREASTMEN

WHAT IF THE NICEST PAIR YOU'VE EVER SEEN IS ON YOUR OWN CHEST?





IMAGINE THE CIGAR-CHOMPING FACTORY manager in charge of human blueprints. He unfurls the plans, pushes back his hard hat, spits on the assembly-line floor:

"You got your male human, see—he's bigger and stronger. Your female, she's smaller and curvier. Genitals are standard peg and hole—your basic all-terrain, lock-and-load reproductive system. Female's got the front-mounted milk bags, of course. And the male's got these nipples too, see, because, uh . . . Wait a sec—get engineering on the horn. This can't be right."

The male breast—nipples, areolae, and the fat and glandular tissue underneath—seems little more than an intriguing evolutionary riddle. But take it one step further and you enter a darker realm of secret shame and gender confusion. Because, as hundreds of thousands of men know, your breasts can grow. Oh, yes they can.

For girls, breast development is the cause of many a hunched-shoulder, awkward, Judy Blume-type moment. But they soon discover the upside to their breasts, as blushing chagrin gives way to pride, popularity, and in some cases a spot on the cheerleading squad. But what if you are a young man and you look down one day to see that your breasts are budding like a girl's? They grow and fill out. Soon, you have happy handfuls. You take a B-cup. What now?

Gynecomastia—the medical term for enlarged breasts on adult men—affects between 40 and 60 percent of all males at some point in their lives, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. Most men will experience it only as a slight swelling during the hormonal maelstrom that is adolescence; normally it subsides quickly, and the chest area will be defined by the pectoral muscle. For some, though, gynecomastia persists into adulthood along a titty spectrum ranging from puffy nipples to fully formed double-D granny hangers. Yet outside of a few Internet bulletin boards and the consultation rooms of plastic surgeons, it is almost never mentioned.

"No one wants to discuss male breasts," says Bill, a 40-year-old software salesman who recently worked up the courage to purchase his first bra. (Some of the men in this article asked that their names be changed.) "Men are vain—they are much more vain than women. A man with breasts—it's an oxymoron, an impossibility. The bearded lady can shave or wax, but breasts are something only women have. If you're a man, by definition you cannot have breasts."

You think you had it tough in junior high with your spurting pizza face and your undescended testicles? Lost the girl you wanted to the varsity quarterback, did you? That's small beer compared to what young men with knockers go through.

"It is hard enough not meeting the standards set by the guy in the underwear ad," says Merle Yost, an Oakland-based psychotherapist who is co-writing a book on gynecomastia and whose Web site—www.gynecomastia.org—is one of the best sources of information on the subject. "Breasts can destroy a man's sense of gender and self, especially if he feels like he's the only one."

Imagine you're a happy, outgoing kid until someone says your breasts are bigger than his

suction that takes between 60 and 90 minutes. Scarring is minimal except for patients with extremely pendulous breasts, in which case some skin may have to be removed.

The surgery runs between \$3,500 and \$8,500, and insurance companies rarely pick up the cost. Nonetheless, nearly 20,000 of the operations were performed in the United States last year, a leap of nearly 50 percent from five years ago. More than half the patients were between the ages of 19 and

founded in 1980 to celebrate the male breast in all its masculine glory; its cluster of Web sites, including Breast Man International, cater to about 1,400 paying members. "I've gone to many Web sites of plastic surgeons, and every single one of them calls gynecomastia a deformity or a disease," Berglund writes on the home page of CMI's Gyno Forum discussion group. "Gyno is not a disease—it's a widespread, naturally occurring phenomenon."

"I HAVEN'T TAKEN MY SHIRT OFF IN FRONT OF ANYONE IN TWELVE YEARS," ONE MAN SAYS.

BACK DADDY: SOME MEN WITH GYNECOMASTIA OPT FOR LIPOSUCTION. FOR OTHERS, SURGERY IS A CAPITULATION TO INTOLERANCE; THEIR BIG BREASTS ARE A SOURCE OF PRIDE.

mom's. Then you can't think about anything else. You used to swim, and now you can't go near a pool. Bullies don't just take your lunch money; they also grope your tits and give them a long, vicious squeeze. They call you Twinkle Tits, Loobs, Boob Boy. You stop going to gym class. You want to take a knife to your chest, lop the fuckers off. There is nothing funny about that *Seinfeld* episode where Kramer invents a male brassiere called the Bro. There is nothing funny about a lot of things.

"It has ruined my life," says Dean, a 23-year-old bank employee whose breasts started to bulge when he was 12. "I'm a little overweight now, but even when I was in great shape, I still had these pregnant-dog breasts."

"You don't understand," adds Bob, 25, a runner who's been smothering his B-cup breasts in a skin-tight leotard and baggy button-downs since he was twelve. "I haven't taken my shirt off in front of anyone—and I mean no one—in twelve years."

In most cases, the direct cause of post-pubertal gynecomastia is unknown, but several factors are believed to contribute, including marijuana smoking, steroid use, and alcohol abuse. Some antidepressants have been implicated. (If you were depressed before, wait until you grow a pair of hooters.) The rise of gynecomastia is also linked to the obesity pandemic, but Buddha boobs are only a small subset of all cases. "Breasts can be composed of all breast tissue, all fat, or a mix," says Douglas Monasebian, a physician with a Park Avenue plastic-surgery practice. "But true gynecomastia is an excessive amount of breast tissue."

For burgeoning numbers of men, the answer is breast-reduction surgery—usually a simple lipo-



34. It is the fifth most common cosmetic-surgery procedure for men, just after hair implants.

The bad news is that gynecomastia sometimes recurs. "The glandular tissue can return, or the fat, or both," says Helen Colen, an attending surgeon at New York University with a plastic-surgery practice. Colen turns away men whom she believes will never be happy no matter how small their breasts are. "Some of these guys are obsessed with having perfect chests to the point of being totally unreasonable. They've got a butt the size of a barrel and they think that if their boobs are smaller then everyone will like them. I tell them, Listen, kiddo, it ain't gonna happen."

"RIP-OFF ARTISTS" IS BOB BERGLUND'S name for doctors who perform male breast-reduction surgery. For the past twelve years, Berglund has headed Chest Man International. CMI was

In fact, the Internet has nurtured a vibrant movement of men dedicated to expunging the shame of gynecomastia. To these men, breast-reduction surgery is not only money-wasting self-mutilation but a capitulation to all the sadistic gym coaches and titty-twisting bullies. They refuse to be complicit in the gender-cleansing of society. Instead of agonizing over how to conceal the condition, they trade thoughts on which brand of bra is most comfortable and how to incorporate their breasts into sex play with their wives. They wear their guns with pride.

"Did you ever ask yourself why God gave men tits?" asks John, a guy in his twenties with 48DD breasts. "Well, I am very religious, and I can only assume that He gave me my big, beautiful breasts for a reason." John's getting married soon and says his fiancée loves to feel him up.

How very gynecomasculine. ■