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Teen boys increasingly struggling with gynecomastia: abnormally large breasts

Nov. 6, 2003

Provided by: Canadian Press

Written by: ISABEL TEOTONIO

EDMONTON (CP) - Teenage boys have always been obsessed with large breasts on the opposite sex, but a growing number of them are becoming fixated with their own.

While some argue the growth of abnormally big breasts on males, known as gynecomastia, is becoming more prevalent, the topic itself remains taboo and steeped in ridicule, humiliation and shame. After all, most guys balk at the idea of admitting they're less than fully male in a society that exalts masculinity, says American psychotherapist Merle Yost, 45, who struggled for decades before having his B cup-sized breasts surgically removed.

"I was a skinny boy developing these rather definite breasts... By the time I reached Junior high, my nickname was 'bits' and it was quite obvious ... the girls were offering me their bras," recalls Yost who now reads similar stories on his website www.gynecomastia.org, which gets up to 100,000 hits a month from around the world.



Merle Yost poses in his psychotherapy office. Yost struggled for decades with B cup-sized breasts before having them surgically removed. (AP / Jeff Chiu)

The website, a mix of medical information and personal experience, also acts as a cyber water cooler where tips are traded on ways to minimize the appearance of a large chest and recommendations are made on which doctors to visit or avoid.

With discussion threads titled "Titted for too long" and "Another 13-year-old with no hope," the site provides an anonymous forum where males express themselves free from ridicule by using aliases such as busy boy, big guns and lonely teen.

In one message, a guy writes, "I'm at the point where I want to rip into myself with a knife. I can't do anything without it affecting my life."

In another, a 17-year-old writes, "Going anywhere bothers me, so most of the time I sit at home and am bored. I feel like for the past two years, I am alive but I am not living. A lot of days I would prefer to be dead than to live with gynecomastia...A trip as simple as going to the store to pick up a loaf of bread takes me about 20 minutes to get ready. I always have to get the right clothes."

The experiences resonate deeply with Yost, who refrained from going to camp or playing sports as a kid.

"It's the classic shame story for adolescent boys, especially when they do 'Shirts and Skins' in gym class, and all the attention is on your chest... The No.1 issue with gynecomastia is shame - they feel badly about who they are because their body has somehow betrayed them."

While the condition is common amongst many teens and can mildly occur during puberty when hormones are out of whack; symptoms typically disappear as adolescence wanes and raging hormones subside.

But in about 15 per cent of teens, higher levels of estrogen than testosterone can result in the growth of large puffy nipples to fully-fledged breasts that can fill a C cup-sized bra. And in some cases, even capable of producing milk.

"(Gynecomastia) is probably more common than we think," says Dr. Kenneth Dolynchuk of

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Winnipeg, who sees patients as young as 16 but refrains from performing surgery until they're fully developed adults.

"For teens, it's a very sensitive period in their development - they're finding themselves sexually and there's a lot of internal angst about their maleness and their femaleness, so this can really play heavily on their psyche."

While there aren't exact figures on the prevalence of gynecomastia, both Yost, who's writing the book *Demystifying Male Gynecomastia*, and Dolynchuk, who's done male breast reduction surgeries for 12 years, think there's a higher rate of it today.

Thanks to a higher incidence of obesity, rampant steroid abuse, and a growing list of medications with estrogen, more men are experiencing adult-onset gynecomastia.

Estimates for the total number affected are as high as 40 per cent but it's difficult to pinpoint since many don't admit having it and others don't even know they do.

"Men are very different from women, they're much more private ... It's like coming out of the closet for men," says Dr. Wayne Perron of the Canadian Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, adding some of his patients won't go to the gym or take their shirts off at the beach.

Weight loss can alter the condition but won't eliminate it completely - the only way to do so is through cosmetic surgery.

In most cases, liposuction alone will remove enough fatty tissue to provide good contouring. But for those with excessive breast tissue, a mastectomy may be required. The results are permanent, but subsequent obesity can create a gynecomastia-like effect.

The condition itself doesn't require treatment unless it's painful or embarrassing. And because it's often considered cosmetic surgery, patients usually dole out around \$3,000 for the procedure.

"These young people suffer so much," says Dr. Frank Lista, a plastic surgeon in Mississauga, Ont., who has performed about 200 surgeries this year - twice as many as last year.

In Canada, there are up to 2,000 of these operations each year, he says.

Complications include infection, skin damage, fluid accumulation, bleeding, and scarring or pigment changes. Meanwhile, numbness or lack of sensation can last up to a year.

"After (surgery), they feel so much self-confidence," says Lista. "It's like a weight has been lifted off them - no pun intended."

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