

health

GYNECOMASTIA

Off their chests

Hormone imbalances and medications can cause enlarged breasts in men. Treatment ranges from hormone therapy to cosmetic surgery.

By Kim Ode
Staff Writer

Here are two words that invariably provoke a snicker or a grimace: male breasts. OK, some of you just stopped reading - or at least hunched your body over your newspaper or screen. Maybe you flashed back to the "Seinfeld" episode in which Kramer invents "the bro" for men with sagging pecs.

If you're a guy, the subject might take you back to your teens when hormonal changes caused a temporary, but nonetheless unnerving, swelling of tissue around your nipples. About one-third of 13- and 14-year-old boys are affected for a time before the condition naturally subsides.

But the condition, called gynecomastia, is becoming more common among older males whose hormones become imbalanced, either from natural changes in liver function due to aging or as a side effect of **medications**.

It's difficult to state how many men deal with enlarged breasts, partly because embarrassment discourages reporting, but also because one of the causes is obesity. Merle Yost, a psychotherapist in Oakland, Calif., with gynecomastia was taken aback when he included a link to the issue on his business website and got thousands of hits. That interest led to him writing and publishing "Demystifying Gynecomastia: Men With Breasts," one of the first books about the subject.

Yost admits the book is more anecdotal than academic. He just wants to get the conversation going by sharing his own experience with the psychological aspects and with breast reduction surgery. "A lot of the talk comes out in jokes, but no one's dealing with the pain," Yost said.

Beyond the emotional pain of being ribbed, physical pain can be present. Most men who seek surgery for the condition do so because the breasts become tender, said Dr. Deborah Day, a radiologist with the Piper Breast Center at Allina Hospitals and Clinics in Minneapolis. Day said the clinic sees one or two men a month whose conditions are serious enough to warrant a referral from the men's primary physicians.

That may not sound like many, but it's enough for the center staff to rethink handing out their standard pink female-oriented patient form with its questions about menstrual periods and creating a new blue form for men, Day said.

Male breasts, while a disconcerting subject for some, actually are discussed more than you might realize. On the wildly popular "American Idol," host Ryan Seacrest often skewered judge Simon Cowell's for flaunting his "man-breasts" with his tight T-shirts. Golfer Phil Mickelson's upper physique is a common subject on some sports websites. Then there's that "Seinfeld" episode.

"There's a huge amount of confusion about what constitutes a normal chest," Yost said. "Just as with women, not all men look the same." Enlarged breasts aren't always evidence of gynecomastia, he said. For overweight men, the enlarged breasts often are fatty tissue. Lose the weight and you'll lose the bosom.

True gynecomastia in adult males usually is caused by an underlying condition, such as liver function or an overactive thyroid. Research continues into the role of alcohol, marijuana, methamphetamine and heroin use, as these substances affect how the liver metabolizes hormones.

Day said that the most common reason for an increase in incidence is from side effects of **medications**. Steroids, some heart **medications**, chemotherapy drugs, antidepressants and treatments for ulcers or epilepsy may result in gynecomastia. Doctors first explore whether a change in **medications** will alleviate the condition, said Dr. Margit Bretzke, a surgeon at the Piper Center. Sometimes, though, cosmetic surgery is the best option.

Most men come in concerned that their enlarged breasts signal something more life-threatening. "A lot of times they just need reassurance that it isn't a cancer," Day said. Male breast cancer accounts for about 1 percent of all breast cancers nationwide.

Yost also knows that reassurance is what many seek. So he is matter-of-fact about the book's slim sales, even with his promise to ship it in an unmarked package. "They're afraid someone's going to find the book in their house."

Kim Ode - 612-673-7185

DRUGS IMPLICATED

- Steroids (prednisone or Hexadrol).
- **Medications** used to treat ulcers (cimetidine).
- **Medications** used to treat epilepsy (phenytoin or Dilantin).
- Digitalis and other heart **medications**.
- Chemotherapy drugs, especially alkylating agents.
- Antiandrogen drugs (flutamide, cyproterone and spironolactone).
- Antianxiety and antidepressant **medications** (diazepam or Valium) and tricyclic antidepressants.

Source: Allina Hospitals and Clinics

GYNECOMASTIA

What is it: Gynecomastia is the development of abnormally large breasts in men.

On the web

- www.allina.com: Click on "conditions and treatments," then click on "health topics and resources" by the