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Reconstructive breast surgery effectively uses real tissue

WIRE SERVICE

Most people would agree that battling breast cancer is a cloud with no silver linings. Yet for women who need a mastectomy, some may find a sliver of light with a type of reconstruction that also trims another area of the body simultaneously. Fat can be taken from the stomach, buttocks, thighs, hips or back to create new breasts.

In essence, women can get a tummy tuck when they have breast reconstruction. It's a procedure that's been done for years, though most women aren't given the option because it's a highly sophisticated surgery that few physicians are trained to do. Instead, women are told they can have one of two types of artificial implants — silicone gel or saline — to replace their breasts.

But now, Dr. Joshua Levine and Dr. Hakan Usal, plastic surgeons working as a team at Holy Name Medical Center, offer breast cancer patients this option, known as perforator flap microsurgical breast reconstruction. The physicians team up for each surgery because it's such an intricate and labor-intensive procedure.

"In the long term, this is really the best option for women," said Dr. Usal. "When a woman has breast cancer, it's not just getting treated for the cancer. It's also losing a main part of what makes them feel like a woman. With this procedure, it's their own tissue and it makes them feel whole again."

Drs. Levine and Usal started performing procedures at Holy Name several months ago when the hospital made the commitment to offer breast cancer patients the option of perforator flap procedures.

"It says a lot about Holy Name that they are proactive — providing the training for nurses and other staff members and purchasing the equipment," Dr. Levine said. "As for patient amenities — it's an unique and unparalleled experience, with a private room and a high nurse-to-patient ratio in a comfortable setting. It certainly can't be found in Manhattan."

In perforator flap microsurgical procedures, the flap — consisting of a section of skin, fat and blood vessels — is removed from one area of the body and transplanted into another. Specifically, the procedure they do is known as a DIEP flap, which does not include transplanting muscle. (The older form of flap surgery, known as TRAM, includes the muscle but is being phased out because of the long-term damage from losing the abdominal muscle.)

The surgery can last from four to eight hours and the hospital stay is typically four to five days. Recovery overall takes longer than procedures for artificial implants because the surgery is more involved and two sections of the body need to heal. But it can be done at the same time a patient undergoes a mastectomy, and the side effects that may arise from implants, such as leaking, are not an issue.

"Most women are candidates for this surgery — but the majority is never even told about it," said Dr. Levine. "It requires a lot of training on the part of the physicians — four subspecialties — so many don't do it. But it's so much better for patients."



PHOTO COURTESY OF HOLY NAME MEDICAL CENTER

Dr. Joshua Levine performs breast reconstruction surgery using the patient's own tissue from another area of the body during the procedure at Holy Name Medical Center.

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