

Do BREASTS *define a woman?*

A FEMALE PLASTIC SURGEON'S PERSPECTIVE

Breasts are a functional anatomic part of the female body, nourishing infants and bonding mothers to their young.

Breasts are also an aesthetically beautiful part of a woman, enhancing sexual attraction and providing physical pleasure. Breasts come in all shapes, sizes, colors, densities and contours. Most women do not have completely symmetric breasts, just like each side of the body and face is not a mirror image of the opposite side.

Factors that contribute to the appearance of a woman's breasts include genetics, hormones, body weight, pregnancy, breast-feeding, and the aging process. Women with excessively large breasts have problems finding clothes and bras that fit, difficulty exercising, and suffer from chronic neck, back, shoulder pain, and rashes. Other women are embarrassed about the size or shape of their breasts, nipples, or areolas. Many women are unable to fully enjoy their lives because of significant embarrassment about their bodies. They may not engage in normal social activities because of this insecurity and emotional or physical pain, and they may not feel attractive to their significant other.

Like it or not, societal and cultural norms contribute to the way we see ourselves. Movies, magazines, television, childhood teasing, and our parents and peers impact our self-esteem and body image long before we have the capacity to decide these things for ourselves.

I struggle to think of one woman I know who believes that her body is perfect. When pressed, most of us do inherently understand that our bodies are amazing to begin with and serve us well throughout life. However, self-esteem and confidence are influenced by how we feel on the outside as well as the inside. Following the natural changes that breasts undergo throughout life, many women are unhappy with their breasts and consider surgery. Women who consider breast surgery usually just want to feel more "normal" or more attractive. They want to improve their body image, self-esteem and confidence.

Over the years, surgical technical advances and anesthetic safety have allowed thousands of woman to successfully reduce, enhance, tuck, lift, change contour, create symmetry and even create new breasts that have been lost or ravaged from cancer treatment, burns, congenital defects and trauma.

Following mastectomy or other treatment for breast cancer, women may be left with a chest or breast deformity, complete breast loss, or dramatic asymmetry. Breast reconstruction surgery can restore cancer patients' body image and allow them to feel whole again. They don't have to wear an external prosthesis or feel the uneven weight of having only one breast. All of this can have a profound impact on feelings of well-being, optimism, and healing.

Some girls develop with one or both breasts being constricted or severely asymmetric, or the nipple-areolar complex may be positioned abnormally low on the breast mound. This can be a cause of significant embarrassment and low-self esteem that can follow a girl or woman throughout her entire life and affect many of her personal relationships. Other women develop excessively large breasts and suffer for years before realizing that something can be done, and that breast reduction surgery is often covered by health insurance. Many other women notice significant changes in the size or fullness of their breasts following pregnancy. As breasts mature, they lose density and become more fatty. Upper fullness is lost, and the entire breast starts to sag. A breast lift (with or without an implant) can restore a more youthful, natural appearance. All of these issues can usually be corrected with outpatient breast surgery and minimal recovery time.

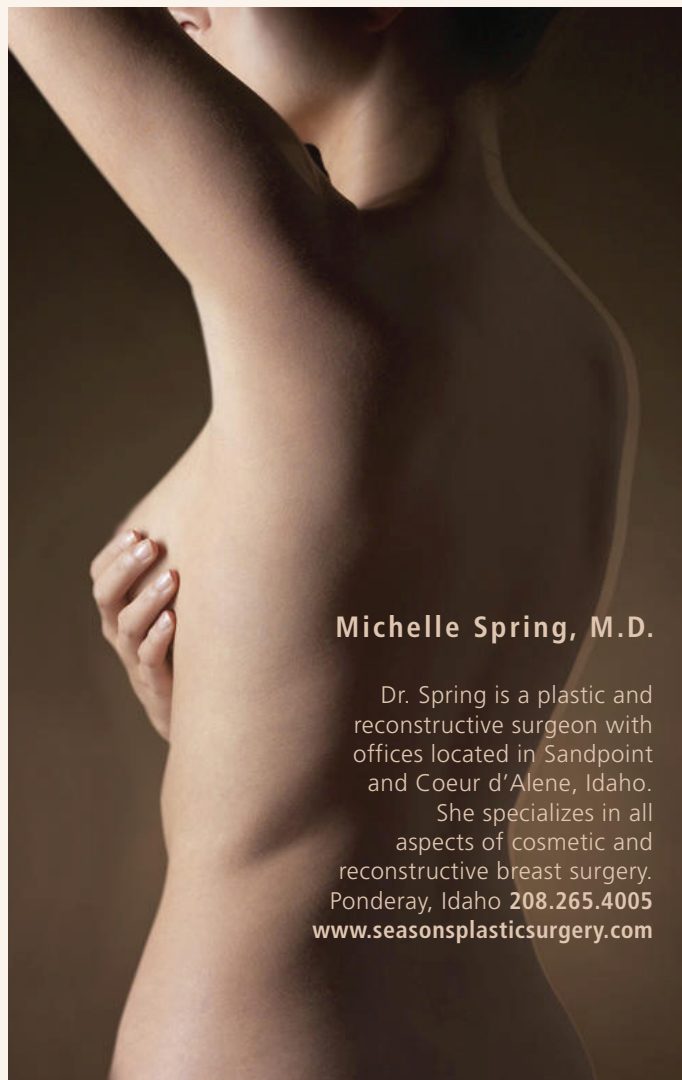
Breast surgery is not for everyone. Poor candidates for surgery are women who are severely depressed, who are considering it as retribution for a damaged relationship, or women who wish to change their bodies to please

someone else. Women who smoke, are obese, or otherwise lead unhealthy lives should not pursue elective breast surgery.

So, DO breasts define a woman?

I believe that our bodies do reflect our state of mind. Often, I see a woman's personality change when she comes into the office after surgery standing taller, smiling more, and engaging more because she is just a little bit happier and more confident. Many women will readily explain how breast reduction surgery changed their lives – how they can buy regular clothes or go to the gym without wearing three sports bras, or that they no longer have chronic pain. Many women feel that breast surgery helped them feel more secure and confident with their bodies, which in turn created a better sexual relationship with their significant other.

As a plastic surgeon and as a woman, I feel that our minds, hearts and bodies define us. I have come to believe that all three are inexorably entwined, and therefore breasts do play a part in defining women. Feeling good about our bodies enhances our lives, and for many women breast surgery is a positive factor in the quest for personal satisfaction.



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