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Breast-reduction surgery takes weight off back

By DR. ALAN MUSKETT For The Gazette

Maryanne (not her real name) came home every night from her job as a hair stylist with aching shoulders and a sore neck, which sometimes turned into a wicked headache.

Finding a position to ease the pull and drag of her heavy, pendulous breasts would provide only temporary relief.

Maryanne had tried many things, including wearing two bras for support (which she had to special order for the DDD size), physical therapy, chiropractic visits and daily doses of ibuprofen.

In the summer, she would develop rashes under her breasts which were difficult to treat and embarrassing. Her shoulders developed deep grooves from the straining bra straps.

Maryanne began developing large breasts as an adolescent, and suffered from self-consciousness around other girls and heard many crude remarks from boys.

As she grew into adulthood, the weight of her breasts made them sag, and to her, become quite unattractive. Subsequent pregnancy and breast-feeding made the situation worse.

One of Maryanne's clients suggested she look into breast-reduction surgery.

Quite simply, breast reduction is an operation to take weight off the neck, shoulders and upper back. Maryanne's symptoms are typical and can be quite debilitating, not to mention expensive.

Many women also feel awkward and self-conscious of their appearance, and may avoid intimate situations or certain clothing. Women may even feel reluctant to discuss their symptoms and concerns with their doctor.

In addition to removing weight and improving symptoms, breast reduction also "lifts" the breast and restores a more pleasing shape and appropriate size.

Breast reduction is a major operation. It requires general anesthesia, but is usually done on an outpatient basis. At least a week off work is required. Vigorous activity is limited for two months.

The actual operation involves removing extra tissue from the lower and outer portions of the breast, and elevating and repositioning the nipple/areolar complex. Incisions are around the nipple, vertically from the nipple to the breast fold, and in the breast fold itself.

Breast reduction is a trade-off - decreased size and symptom relief, as well as an improved shape - for surgical incisions and the subsequent scars. Most patients feel the results are well worth it, but about 10 percent of patients express dissatisfaction with the scars.

As with any operation, complications can occur. Wound-healing problems, scarring, asymmetry and infections are infrequent but possible. Patients must stop smoking at least a month before and after surgery.

Most insurance companies, Medicare and Medicaid will cover breast reduction surgery if specific size and symptom criteria are met.

Although Maryanne is pleased with her improved appearance, it is the relief of that aching feeling that has her excited.

Women who feel like the weight of the world is on their shoulders should ask a health-care provider if breast reduction is an option for you.

Dr. Alan Muskett practices plastic and reconstructive surgery at Billings Plastic Surgery.