

BUYER BEWARE BREAST IMPLANT RESURGENCE

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The first time I remember feeling that my breasts were inadequate was on an outing to Lake Erie with a gaggle of my girlfriends when I was about 16.

As we sunned ourselves in our bikinis on a hot, humid day at Shirkston Beach, a group of boys sauntered over to chat. As the conversation continued, one of the boys announced that he'd attempt to guess our ages. To our bewilderment, his estimates were based on the size of our breasts. The bigger the boobs, the older the girl, he surmised.

Since I was the smallest, he declared, I was obviously the youngest. Except that I was the oldest. We laughed off the incident, but it stuck in my mind. My mother was able to ease my concerns when I complained later that my breasts were too small.

As the years went by, I had a love-hate relationship with my breasts. When I loved them, I wore tube tops and halter tops -- glad that I didn't have to wear a support bra.

When I hated them, I bought padded bras but invariably found my enhanced bustline more amusing than empowering. Who was I trying to kid?

I have made peace with my boobs. So what if I don't have cleavage? Neither do most of the top models. Yet tens of thousands of North American women a year are so insecure about their figures that they have breast jobs. Last year, 264,000 U.S. women had implants, up 24 per cent from 2000.

And now, only a few years after Dow Corning Corp. agreed to a huge compensation package over the alleged dangers of silicone-gel breast implants, the devices may be returning.

Because of concerns about the risks of ruptures, leaks and chronic illnesses possibly linked to the implants, silicone breast implants were pulled off the market in Canada and the U.S. in 1992.

But now both Canada and the U.S. are considering lifting the restrictions on the devices. (Here, physicians can use silicone implants on a case-by-case basis with permission from Health Canada. Almost 10,000 such implants were authorized in 2003 and 2004.)

We should be suspicious of the two U.S. manufacturers that have asked Ottawa's permission to market silicone implants here. We know they want to make money. But where is the evidence that these devices are safe?

Last month, reviewers with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration estimated that up to 93 per

cent of silicone breast implants rupture within 10 years.

A 2003 B.C. study found that women who had implants visited doctors and specialists significantly more than other women and that women with breast implants were more than four times as likely to need hospital care.

For some of the women, the complications were so bad, they no longer wanted the implants -- 40 per cent of the respondents had their implants removed.

"For people that do have problems, they can be significant," says Ann Pederson, of the B.C. Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, which did the 2003 study.

If Canada re-introduces silicone implants, there should be a monitoring process, through an implant registry like the one in Britain, she says.

There is not enough information on the long-term effects of breast implants, warns Kathleen O'Grady, of the Canadian Women's Health Network. "We're simply not comfortable with an approval process (without) long-term scientific data."

So buyer beware, ladies. Will you be lucky enough to have implants and no complications? Or will you be crippled with a mysterious illness?