

Title: How does undergoing a mastectomy influence breast cancer patients' perception of their body image? A qualitative study within a South African public healthcare setting in the Western Cape

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Introduction/Background: Women who receive a diagnosis of breast cancer undergo multiple treatments, including a mastectomy, which results in a permanent physical change. This change is likely to have a significant impact on women's perceptions of their body image and may have mental health implications. While studies on perceptions of body image following a mastectomy exist, few have been conducted in low-to-middle-income countries and, to the best of our knowledge, none have included women who have had neo-adjuvant chemotherapy. As such, we sought to explore the perceptions of body image, before and after a mastectomy, among female patients with breast cancer who previously underwent neo-adjuvant chemotherapy within a South African public healthcare setting in the Western Cape. This presentation will focus on perceptions of body image pre-mastectomy.

Materials and Methods

Study design: The study was qualitative in nature and semi-structured interviews were held with 15 women who met inclusion criteria and were either receiving their last or second-last session of neoadjuvant chemotherapy.

Setting and sampling: Recruitment took place at the Breast Clinic, Tygerberg Hospital, between 04/2022 and 04/2023.

Inclusion and Exclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria: Patients who received neoadjuvant chemotherapy, female, 18 years and older, can independently provide informed consent, scheduled to undergo a unilateral or bilateral mastectomy and fluent in Afrikaans, English or isiXhosa.

Exclusion criteria: Patients who do not identify as female, physical deformities that affect the ability to do a conventional mastectomy, previously documented diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder involving body image, previous diagnosis of breast cancer, underwent previous breast surgery and patients scheduled to undergo a mastectomy but due to other circumstances did not undergo a mastectomy.

Data collected: Data was collected telephonically and audio recorded with permission from the participants. Interviews were conducted by a trained post-graduate student. Participants took part in two interviews, one pre-mastectomy and one post-mastectomy. Pre-mastectomy interviews were completed in 31 minutes, on average, were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where applicable and analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti software.

Ethical consideration: The research was approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee of Stellenbosch University (HREC reference: S21/06/110).

Results: Participants spoke about what their breasts symbolise to them and described them as representing 'femininity', 'woman's pride', 'motherhood and nurturing', 'beauty', 'personality', and 'wellness'. The thought of losing their breast(s) did not lead to the feeling of loss of these attributes but rather a sense of relief and finality to a long and difficult treatment process. Being healthy was more important than their body image and they were more concerned and apprehensive about the actual surgery and the logistics thereof, than their body image following the surgery. For many, the side effects of chemotherapy played a bigger role in negatively affecting their well-being and body image. The women explained that faith and religion were important sources of support, as were family, fellow patients and the hospital staff.

Conclusion: Our findings suggest that, pre-operatively, women with breast cancer who have undergone neoadjuvant chemotherapy do not seem to think that a mastectomy will influence their body image. Instead, women seem to experience a sense of relief that a long treatment journey, which included chemotherapy and will soon include a mastectomy, will finally come to an end. Indeed, women were more pre-occupied with returning to a state of wellness and good health, than concerns over body image. The next step in this research will be to analyse women's perceptions of their body image following their surgery.