

A LINE ON LIFE

5/26/96

The American Breast Mystique *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

In the United States, most men seem fascinated with big breasts. These men seem to think that big-breasted women (like Marilyn Monroe and Loni Anderson) are sexier, more attractive and more feminine. In addition, many men believe that children of big-breasted women will have all the milk they could want — and more. How did these attitudes develop? Are they accurate?

First, let's explore one reason why breasts might have become so important in terms of sexuality. In our culture, we distinguish the sexes by the way they look. Small children first identify women by their longer hair or if they wear skirts or dresses. (Even the figures on restroom doors relate to women wearing skirts.)

However, these cues cannot be used to identify a girl as being physically (sexually) mature. Although many changes occur in puberty, breast development is the most visible change. Generalizing from this cue, women with smaller breasts are more likely to be viewed as sexually immature.

At the other end of the continuum, the same cue leads many men to believe that big-breasted women have "*more of what it takes*." Are big-breasted women really sexier? Like beauty, being "*sexy*" in the proverbial "*eye of the beholder*." If men view big breasts as being sexy, big breasts will be a "turn on" for them. Men's magazines encourage this fallacy by selecting only big-breasted women as models.

Since smaller-breasted women are not featured in these magazines, this implies that they are not as appealing sexually. Even though they may not originally view large breasts as sexier, both men and women are influenced by the biased use of large-breasted models.

In contrast to this "*sexy*" media image, there is absolutely no evidence that breast size has any relation to women's level of sexual interest, her capacity for sexual response, or her ease in attaining orgasms. Some women have few or no sexual sensations, if their breasts are caressed. This is just as true for women with big breasts as it is for women with smaller ones. On the other hand, women who become sexually excited when their breasts are stimulated do so regardless of breast size.

Although big-breasted women may like some of the attention they get, many of them dislike not being valued as a whole person. They are unhappy about being stared at, joked about, or regarded as highly sexed or promiscuous. If their feelings are strong enough, they may go through surgery to reduce their breast size.

The constant emphasis on breast size also has a damaging effect on smaller breasted women. In the past, breast growth in a young girl was welcomed as a step toward mature

womanhood. Now it is more likely to be an anxious period of concern about how big her breasts will grow. Girls who go through puberty later are more likely to stuff their bras with Kleenex or wear "*falsies*". Because of their smaller breasts, these girls tend to see themselves as unfeminine and unattractive. With this negative self-image, they may avoid contacts with the other sex. In this way, they pass up chances to develop a sense of comfort in their relationship with boys at the very time when such a feeling normally — and most easily — develops.

The fascination of American males with female breasts influences women in another way. Many women who consider themselves as "*flat-chested*" or "*underdeveloped*" seek to improve their attractiveness and self-esteem in various ways. Besides padding their bras, some women use exercises, lotions or mechanical devices like suction machines to enlarge their breasts. Although they may be widely advertised, these methods do not work.

For this reason, so-called "*breast augmentation surgery*" has become popular. In the past, liquid silicone was injected directly into the breasts to increase their size. This method led to many complications. Later, soft, thin plastic pouches filled with silicone were implanted through an incision in the breast.

Complications have also developed from this process. The breast mystique is reduced when you understand more about the breast. The breast is a modified — and glorified — sweat gland. The basic difference between large and small breasts is the number of fat cells. Larger breasts have more fat cells — not more or larger milk glands. Therefore breast size is not related to the amount of milk produced.

**Breast development may signal that a girl has become an adult,
but it is only one small aspect of becoming a woman.**

Understanding the origin of fallacies related to breast size can help to reduce the anxieties of many women. Even if it is necessary to undergo a mastectomy — surgical removal of the breast — any woman can still be a unique, worthwhile, feminine, attractive and lovable person.

* Adapted from information in Masters, Johnson & Kolodny, *Human Sexuality*, Little, Brown and Company, 1982, pages 40-43.