



I had a short blonde wig, a long red one and a black one



## Curls, Cup Sizes and Confidence

Stacey Amer uncovers the truth about the body image battle that many female cancer victims have to endure...

Everyone has those days where they look in the mirror and are not as content as usual to see their reflection staring back at them. Perhaps your hair isn't co-operating, or your clothes seem to have tightened over night. Imagine if those odd days spanned out to consecutive months, whilst also fighting for your life against one of the most common but deadly diseases known.

This is the prospect that some women have to face after being diagnosed with cancer. Not only do they have what is probably

the toughest battle of their lives to undertake, but they will also have to cope with losing some of the aesthetic features that each and every one of us take for granted day by day.

At first sight you may not have ever noticed, but this is the situation Lesley Gray, 58, was faced with a decade ago. Diagnosed with an aggressive cancer in her left breast, Lesley knew she would have a battle on her hands involving both her life, and her looks.

Following her diagnosis, Lesley opted for a bi-lateral mastectomy to remove

both breasts, thinking primarily of any remaining health risks.

"You just focus on getting the bad out of you. It doesn't matter what needs to be done, you'll just let the hospital do it. I never thought about my appearance to anyone else other than myself. So when I first looked at my scars after my surgery there was a relief. A huge relief that that had gone."

Breast reconstruction was never pushed as an option for Lesley, as the scarring and removal on her left side is right down to the bone on her ribs. Her chest caves inward at one point due to the depth of the tumour that was previously present. It is not just the obvious effects of cancer that take a toll on the body image of women affected though.

For 50-year-old Tina Thomson, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in November 2010, the smaller consequences to her image proved far more irritating and on-

going than some of the more commonly apparent changes.

"Your skin's not very good when you have cancer, it gets bad during radiotherapy and my fingernails are terrible. They're all brittle and split and they don't grow at all. My toenails are the same. You want to look nice because you don't feel like a person. You feel like something's missing."

During chemotherapy treatment, Tina lost all of her body hair. Although warned about the loss of the hair on her head, she claims that you can never be prepared for the moment of realisation when it actually begins to shed. Despite this huge alteration to her appearance, Tina's outlook wasn't completely negative when it came to her hair loss:

"I didn't have to wash it or fiddle with it and getting ready was so quick. You'd never ask for it but it was quite nice not having to shave your legs or anything like that. But not having eyelashes was terrible

and you can't even put anything else on, you're not allowed to use false ones. You can pencil in your eyebrows but I just left it - it went with my bald head!"

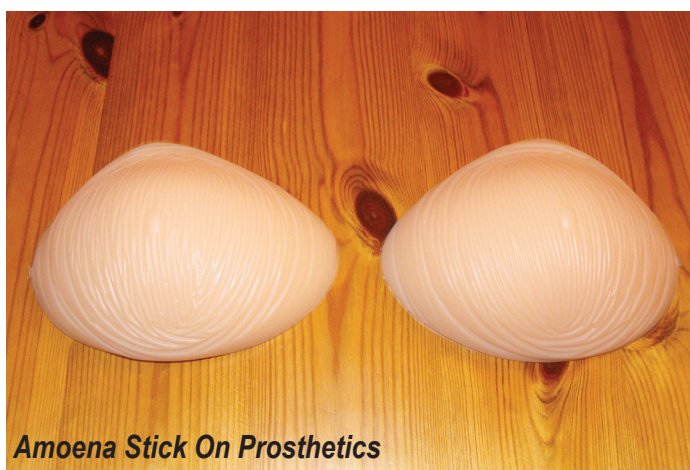
When it came to being bald, Tina turned down the offers of wigs. Despite trying one that was cut in the same style as her former locks, she felt uncomfortable in it and opted for head scarves instead.

Lesley on the other hand, experimented with an abundance of styles and colours of wigs during treatments, but only to lighten her mood. Although never wearing a wig to hide the fact that she was battling cancer, she enjoyed the variety of wigs and hats that she could try, making the best of a bad situation.

"I had a short blonde wig, a long red one and a black one like Uma Thurman from Pulp Fiction. I had hats and all sorts. I looked different every day. After Chemo, my hair started growing back quite quickly, but it returned like grey curly sheep's wool."



So what if it's  
cost me a body  
image that's  
completely  
shot?



**Amoena Stick On Prosthetics**



Unlike Lesley, Tina is planning to have reconstruction in the future. Her reasoning for this is to recover the ability to wear what she wants once again.

Both women stressed the fact that the restriction they now have from clothing annoys them the most – due to the style of the bras and prosthetics that they now wear. “Sometimes I feel a bit like a transvestite – I’m wearing something I don’t need to wear, a useless item of clothing that makes me sweat and is heavy – just because society tells me this is how I should look” explains Lesley.

Lesley is currently working with Amoena, the leading company in the UK for breast prosthetics to help them develop and improve their range for women that have lost their natural breasts. Lesley aims to get a ‘better fit’ from the Amoena prosthetics and if her advice leads to helping other women, she is more than happy to help out with the companies prospects. Amoena’s range stems from clothing, loose prosthetics to fit in bras, stick on prosthetics right through to swimwear.

Health psychologist Lynne Dunwoody from the British Psychological Society believes that coming to terms with a changed body image can often take time.

“Some people can become very depressed from the changes in their body image. They can feel isolated and lonely. It varies on how long these feelings can last depending on what treatment or surgery was had, but it can take a long while for women to come to terms with how they now look.”

For Tina and Lesley though, they feel more confident now than they ever expected to. Each hurdle may prove difficult, but living their life is what really matters, no matter how they look.

Lesley says, “For me, I’m just lucky. I wanted the cancer out of my body. So what if it cost me losing my hair, putting on some weight, no boobs and a body image that was completely shot? I’m still here.”

■ Lynne Dunwoody is a member of the British Psychological Society and a health psychology lecturer at Ulster University.

## Information

For more information on Amoena products visit [www.amoena-online.co.uk](http://www.amoena-online.co.uk) or call 0845 072 4027 to request a catalogue

For advice and support on breast and other cancers visit [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk) or [www.cancerresearch.org.uk](http://www.cancerresearch.org.uk)