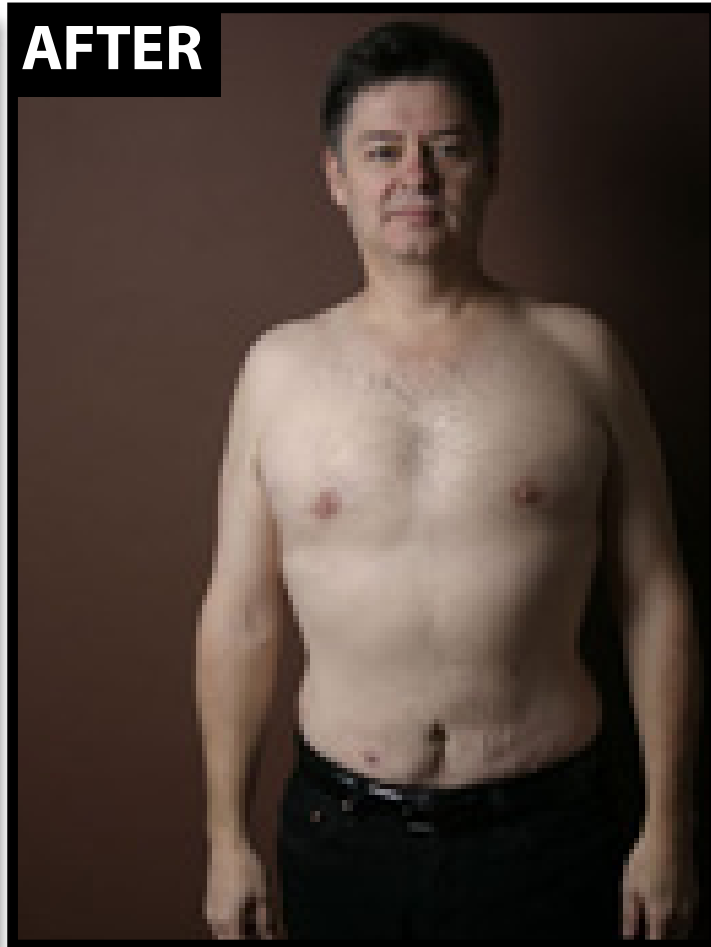


**BEFORE**



**AFTER**



# TAKE THEM OFF: A MAN WITH NATURAL FEMALE BREASTS

A hormone disorder that causes men to grow breasts is more common than expected.

**By Eric Jansen**

When friends invited a young Merle Yost to a pool party, or the beach, it would strike terror in his heart. The thought of taking off his shirt in public and exposing his female sized breasts was down right scary. An imbalance in sex hormones during puberty can cause a condition known as gynecomastia, enlargement of the male breasts. For Yost, being a gay male with female breast added to the shame.

At age 11, the Oakland native started to develop female features. "I was a very skinny little kid who started to grow breasts—not just hard lumps under the nipples as many teenage boys do, but very noticeable A-cup breasts," said Yost. "My nickname in junior high

was 'tits.' The girls offered their bras; the boys groped, twisted and taunted."

A doctor informed Yost's parents that he could remove the lumps under their boy's breasts, but that if he did, Yost would not grow any taller. His parents decided not to have them removed. "I was left to suffer in school and learned to hide my body as best I could," said Yost. "My parents and I never again discussed my chest."

Almost two decades later, while finishing his internship to become a licensed marriage and family therapist in 1993, Yost had breast reduction surgery. Last summer, he had a second surgery to remove breast tissue that grew back, along with abdominal liposuction.

"I feel reborn," Yost said. "Combined with 30 pounds of weight loss in preparation for the surgery, finally my internal picture of myself is reflected when I look in the mirror, and the positive feedback from close friends and acquaintances has been amazing.

"Am I perfect? No, but that was not my expectation," he said. "I wanted to look better and most of all, to feel better. I've found myself softer and more relaxed."

Yost knows surgery isn't for everyone, even if they can afford the high cost. About eight years ago, Yost posted a section about gynecomastia on his therapy practice website that grew so quickly he launched a separate site — [www.gynecomastia.org](http://www.gynecomastia.org) — that now gets 1.5 million hits per year. Yost learned a lot

from online submissions sent by men all over the world.

"Most had never heard of this condition until their family doctor identified it, and often that doctor was unaware of the cause or of its impact," said Yost. "Most boys are advised to ignore it, that it will go away. For most, it does. But the rest feel like freaks and receive little or no compassion."

Sensing a demand for information, Yost published a book on the subject last year named - "*Demystifying Gynecomastia: Men with Breasts.*" About one-third of boys and men deal with a pronounced case of gynecomastia at some time in their lives. Although it's most common in adolescence and usually passes quickly, adult onset is on the rise with men's increased use of anti-depressants and other prescription drugs and increasing obesity in the United States.

A mild form of gynecomastia affects up to 70 percent of boys briefly when passing through puberty, said Yost. Their livers can't keep up with all the testosterone raging through their young bodies, and what the liver can't process converts to estrogen, sometimes leading to painful nipples and puffy breasts. Some men will even produce breast milk.

For most, it dissolves quickly once hormone levels stabilize and the liver adjusts. But for some, hormone stabilization is delayed and breast growth is obvious and permanent. This can cause severe emotional harm and a lifetime of body self-consciousness."

Some gay and bi men accept their "feminine" breasts. "Some guys and women love them," said college administrator Don Gresby. Joe, who didn't want his last name used, said he was panicked but also "fascinated" when his breasts started to grow at age 34. He ruled out surgery and said one male lover "seems to enjoy" his breasts.

"Gynecomastia itself is benign - it's simply development of a secondary female characteristic," said Yost. "However, it does signal other things that may need treatment, anything from a tumor on the pituitary gland or liver dysfunction to weight gain."

"Coaches, teachers, and others who deal with boys --- especially where they're shirtless, like swimming -- need to know about this condition in order to prevent the torture, taunting, and humiliation other teens can inflict," said Yost. "Simply normalize it. No two people develop exactly the same, and adolescent gynecomastia is well within the range of normal."

*Eric Jansen is a freelance writer in San Francisco.*