

Andi's Story

Age 52, Immediate TRAM Flap Reconstruction and Revisionary Procedure with AlloDerm® Regenerative Tissue Matrix

"When I was told that I had breast cancer, the first reaction I had was about my two kids. I was less worried, frankly, about losing my breasts than I was about losing my life and not seeing my kids grow up.

You quickly turn that information into action, and I immediately started to seek all kinds of information. What does it mean? What are the options for me? What's the best way for me to proceed? And frankly, the decision about reconstruction came – was really the last decision I made, and it was literally the night before my surgery.

As I was researching what to do, I obviously met with my breast mastectomy surgeon, who explained that if I wanted certain reconstruction procedures that it could be done simultaneously with my mastectomy. And I opted to go that route because I felt that I wanted to minimize the number of times I had to have surgery.

I chose to do a TRAM flap procedure, partly because I was given the option of having a tummy tuck at the same time. That seemed pretty good to me. The other reason was, again, that it was something that I could do all at once, as opposed to having implants which would require a variety of procedures following my surgery.

Eleven years ago when I was faced with the question of what kind of reconstruction to do, the option of tissue matrix wasn't available and I lived with the TRAM flap result for about eight years before thinking about a second procedure.

During one of my routine checkups with my oncologist, I had mentioned to her that I was not really happy with the results that I had gotten, but that I really wasn't too eager to go back into surgery and didn't think that there was anything that could be done anyway. And she highly recommended that I talk to a plastic surgeon because the procedures had improved greatly and there were many more options. So I figured, what could a consultation hurt.

I went to see the plastic surgeon who described for me a process where he would use an implant under the muscle, as opposed to replacing the breast because I had already had the TRAM flap for that part. And under the muscle it would give me more fullness above the breast, which was what was missing. My kids used to call me ET in a bathing suit because of the concave nature of the area above my breast.

And he explained that using this tissue matrix, he could create a little hammock and put an implant in and give me the fullness that I was missing and was quite confident that I could have a better outcome. So I agreed to do it.

I'm thrilled with the results that I got. I was actually incredulous that I could look as normal as I do and feel as comfortable as I am in the clothes that I can wear now, and I'm very grateful that my kids gave me the catalyst to do something about this.

Important Information: Every patient is different and their reconstruction options and their results may vary. All depictions on the site are for illustration purposes only. Whether or not you have breast reconstruction is a decision you need to make in consultation with your physician. Only you and your physician can determine the best option for you. Please ask your doctor to explain the benefits and risk of various reconstruction options and whether they are right for you.

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Andi's Story (continued)

I definitely feel that I made the right decisions all along the way, but they were hard, thought-out decisions. Surviving cancer is a lot of work, and it requires that you ask a lot of questions, that you do your homework, that you challenge any information that you're given and that you find as many resources as you possibly can, both for your moral support as well as for the project at hand, which is to survive.

Breast reconstruction has enabled me to feel like the woman that I was before I had my first surgery. I remember thinking when I was being wheeled in for my mastectomy that I felt perfectly well the day before and I was going into the hospital and I knew that I was going to come out maimed. And it made me rethink hospitals. They're usually places where you come out feeling well again because you're sick going in, and I didn't feel like a sick person going in.

So to come out maimed and to now feel whole, that I can wear whatever I want to wear, that my kids won't call me ET, that I can wear a bathing suit, that I can show off some cleavage if I feel like it, I don't hesitate in my work or in my social life, moving the way I want to move. I exercise regularly. I lift my arms. I lift weights. I'm fine. And I don't even think about it that much anymore.

Women who are facing the question of reconstruction need to try to make that decision as early in their breast cancer treatment as possible. And that's because the choices that you make for your breast cancer treatment can have an effect on the outcomes for your reconstruction. That was something that I lucked out on because I made the choice to have the TRAM flap. I never had radiation. I actually didn't even have to have chemotherapy, which was another story for another time. But the reality is you need to try to make your decisions about reconstruction or at least educate yourself about it as early as possible in the process.

My message to women listening to this videotape is you can do this. You can do this. You can make the right choices for yourself. Just ask a lot of questions and when you make your decision, don't look back. It's the best decision for you."

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