

Karen's Story

Age 48, Immediate DIEP Flap and SIEA Flap Reconstruction

"My whole family has had breast cancer. And we knew that my sister had the BRCA-1 gene, so you kind of feel like you know that you're going to get it eventually, so when it actually happens, it's almost like, 'Oh, here it is and now I can deal with it.'

Of course, it's very frightening. For me, it was not nearly as frightening as when my sister was diagnosed. I think as a surgeon, I felt like I had a sense of knowledge and control about how I was going to deal with things. I think what surprised me was how little I knew about how hard it was going to be.

I think for me, the choice of what I was going to do was a little different than for other women because as a reconstructive surgeon who did a lot of this surgery and also as the granddaughter, daughter and sister of breast cancer patients, I had a lot of time to think about it. And so I had always pretty much known that if I was diagnosed I was going to have bilateral mastectomies and reconstruction.

My mother, who has had bilateral mastectomies, actually never had reconstruction. My sister had her reconstruction with implants, and I just felt that for me to be whole and to be complete included having my breasts. I was young. I didn't want to feel like that part of me was missing, and I'd also had a great interest in doing that work and had done quite a bit of it myself, so it was really kind of not something I thought about in great detail.

I think everyone is open to their own choice, and I think the power is in the choice itself. In terms of how I chose what type of reconstruction I was going to have, I think for me I had – I'm a large woman, so I had a good tummy and I tend to be very allergic to sutures and tattoos and anything foreign in my body, so I just always felt like an autogenous reconstruction, meaning it was using my own tissues, was going to be perfect choice for me.

I have great breasts. They are so much better than they were before. I'm really proud of them. They're beautiful, and I feel beautiful because – because of them.

I always say cancer made me nice because it really lets you reevaluate your life and the things that you were getting upset about that you let go of. I think it has given me the right to make certain choices. For example, I hug all my patients and I tell them that if you don't like a doctor who hugs you, then you should get another doctor because I'm too old to change. And I think that that helps me take care of people who I really have empathy for and who really appreciate my style of delivering care.

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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Karen's Story (continued)

I think the most important thing is to make a choice that you're really comfortable with. If you're not comfortable, you either need more information or maybe your surgeon isn't the surgeon for you. And I think that a good surgeon should be able to answer all your questions, never ridicule you, always respect your point of view and listen. And that was really important for me. I think it's important for everybody to be listened to and to really be understood that this is your personal journey.

I think the most important thing to tell someone who is facing breast cancer is that it's going to be all right, because no matter what they're going to face, it's going to be all right. I think that – that women together have amassed an enormous sense of community and strength around this disease because it's so common, and no matter what happens, you know, there is a way that we're going to deal with it on our own and together.”

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