

WEIGHT *off my* CHEST

When good boobs go bad

Brain fog, joint pain, hair loss, anxiety, depression, and rashes — seemingly unrelated symptoms with no identifiable cause. But for an increasing number of women, these are the physical representations of what is becoming known as Breast Implant Illness. Catherine Sylvester reports.

ALREADY LOW on self-esteem in her early 20s, it was overhearing two people discussing her appearance that was the final push Rachel Taane needed to commit to breast implant surgery.

"They were like, 'She'd be real hot if she didn't have s**t tits!'", the Bay of Plenty local says. "I'd always sort of wanted them because I was modelling, and when I was younger, everyone always had bigger boobs."

Travelling to Thailand for the surgery proved to be a more affordable option than having the implants done locally, and for the first few years, everything was relatively smooth sailing. It wasn't until the three-year mark that Rachel started to notice some unusual symptoms, which at the time, she did not consider related to her new breasts.

Extreme fatigue, endometriosis flare-ups, and brain fog she chalked up to the stresses of being a young mum and studying, but when she started experiencing unexplained chronic nerve pain and the sensation of itching and burning within her arms, as well as boil-like sores on her breasts she knew it was time to seek medical advice. However, this marked the beginning of an exasperating seven-year journey to find answers within a system that doesn't recognise the issue Rachel believes was the problem all along — Breast Implant Illness (BII).

Despite embarking on what she describes as a process of elimination in the form of diagnostic testing including a mammogram, an MRI, consulting with a

dermatologist, and being prescribed heavy-duty nerve blockers which caused side effects, her symptoms persisted and even worsened in some aspects.

Particularly unbearable were the nerve issues in her arms which were mildly relieved only through the application of ice packs — or ice blocks if she was caught out with a painful episode when out and about.

"I'd be in tears all the time... and just going, if this never goes away, how am I going to live like this?" she says.

Determined to get answers as to why she could be experiencing these issues, she began researching possible causes and came across Breast Implant Illness. While documenting her symptoms and undergoing testing, she met several women online who shared similar experiences to hers and found that by removing their breast implants, their health had improved almost immediately.

GP 'laughed in my face'

Through reading various medical journal articles, listening to podcasts, and speaking with others, Rachel became convinced that her implants were causing the myriad of ailments she was experiencing.

While she concedes there can be difficulty in gaining a diagnosis because all the symptoms of BII could have been attributed to other factors in her life, she still found the experience of not being believed to be frustrating and triggering.

"The first doctor made me feel like I was an absolute idiot," says the 34-year-old mother of two teenagers. "She literally



laughed [in] my face!"

Undeterred but resigned to the fact she was unlikely to be granted publicly-funded explant surgery, Rachel began the process of securing a personal loan to pay for the removal herself, but due to her exhaustion, she made the decision to step back from her job, and had to cancel the loan.

In what she describes as one last attempt with her doctor, she was thrilled to learn she had been accepted into the public system and after seven years of debilitating physical ill-health, found herself in hospital waking up from a capsulectomy — a procedure where the capsule and the breast implant it surrounds are removed.

"Looking down was pretty full on," she says. "It was literally a weight off my chest."

Despite fears that the surgery in mid-January might not make a difference to her health, the DJ and social worker says that

up to 98 per cent of her symptoms have gone, and it's only the occasional discomfort in her arms that sometimes flares up, but nothing compared to what it was.

An added benefit is that she's now much happier with her body than when she had implants and has more self-love for it. While stressing the importance of women doing whatever it is that feels best for them, in her case "I thought it would fix my problems, but actually, it wasn't about my boobs. It was about my own self worth."

Her encouragement to others considering breast implants is to make sure they're educated on all the potential risks and to make an informed decision. If they also experience the types of health issues she did, she urges others not to disregard their feelings about their body, but to do some research, document the symptoms, and never give up advocating for

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RACHEL TAANE

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Rachel Taane at her home in Tauranga talking to Viva Local about her explant surgery. Photo / Alex Cairns



Personal preference patients have moved on from their original implants and want a more subtle appearance, says Mark, who also has rooms in Harley St, London. The surgical reasons for explant surgery are capsular contraction, implant rupture, or when a patient develops breast cancer requiring implant removal, he says. And medical reasons include rheumatoid arthritis and BII.

Mark has seen a group of patients for whom their implants seem to be quite unremarkable, but they complain of night sweats, fatigue, and joint pain. What they are expressing are symptoms of a condition called Breast Implant Illness. "It's a very real condition to those people, and we have to respect their symptoms and their suffering. Once they have their implants taken out, their symptoms tend to disappear."

Respecting the condition

Although Mark says the most common reasons patients seek implant removal is personal preference or capsular contraction (where the tissue around the breast has grown hard or tight), he does see a couple of people a year who come to him seeking relief from BII. "I think the patient understands their condition best, so I respect the condition."

"I don't fully understand it, but I'm certainly very happy to be proactive and help them with it."

Before operating, patients are required to undertake a series of medical tests to ensure their symptoms are not being caused by other health issues.

Explant surgery aims to "remove the implant and the bag of scar tissue [capsule] as a unit", before sending the tissue away to be analysed.

Mark says his explant patients want as much of the capsule taken out as possible.

The operation, performed under general anaesthetic, can take two hours to complete, with a two- to four-week period of recovery, and is "harder than the original operation".

Getting her mojo back

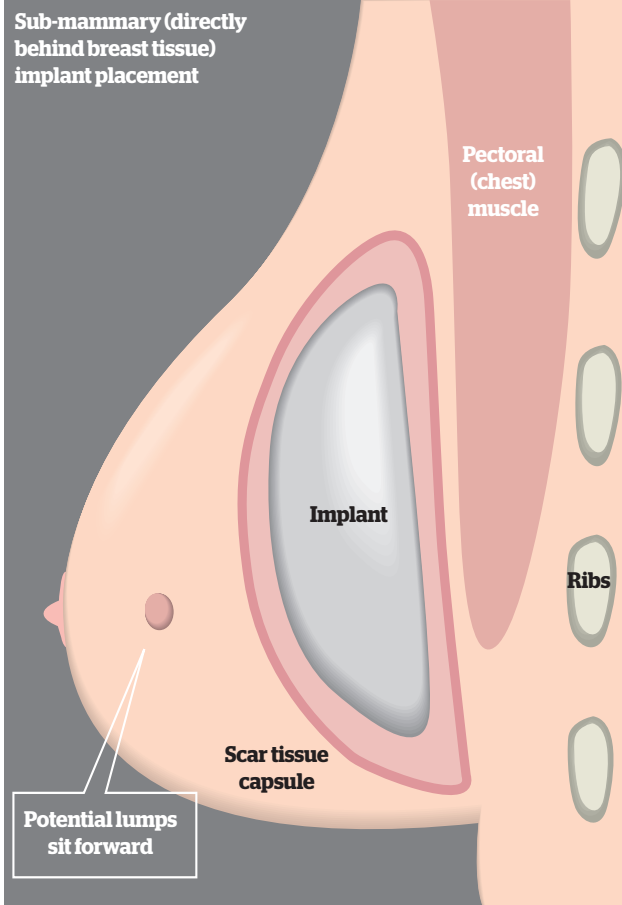
Recently Rachel asked her husband, musician Tiki Taane, what she was like before she had her breast implants. He told her she was "here, there, everywhere... wild in a good way, and super energetic and keen to do things."

With her health already vastly improved, she is looking at getting back into social work, and recently performed a set at the Shipwrecked music festival.

Her brain fog has gone and she has more energy.

Happier, healthier, and grateful for Aotearoa's public health system that enabled her to have her implants removed, Rachel is getting her mojo back and loving it.

BREAST IMPLANT



Source: Dr Mark Gittos / Herald graphic

around black box warnings on breast implants to include "Breast implants have been associated with systemic symptoms" which they acknowledge some patients refer to as Breast Implant Illness.

In the documentary, board-certified plastic surgeon Dr David Rankin says that further study into the illness and its causes is necessary. The creation of pre-surgery diagnostics to indicate a patient's likelihood of experiencing symptoms would be beneficial, and may bring about a greater understanding of BII, he says.

David told Viva Local Life that he stopped performing breast augmentation in 2019, and shifted the focus of his practice to specialising in explants after having seen most of his patient's health improve after implant removal surgery. Since then, he's performed close to 4000 explants with more than 85 per cent of clients reporting the majority of symptoms had been resolved after surgery.

The Florida-based surgeon also says that most of the women who were coming to him to look at breast implant removal felt their concerns were not being heard within the medical community, but that now, many patient referrals are coming from medical professionals in all areas.

"I can confidently say that there's been a positive shift within the medical community regarding BII."

Ultimately, Myjanne opted against implants after her investigation into Breast Implant Illness and listening to so many women share the difficulties they'd experienced.

"I'm much more accepting of my body now after going through that journey."

'Respect their symptoms'

Auckland-based plastic surgeon Dr Mark Gittos says he performs about 15 to 24 breast explants a year, with one or two being attributed to Breast Implant Illness.

There are three main reasons his clients come to him for this type of surgery, he says — personal, surgical, and medical.

Once they have their implants taken out, their symptoms tend to disappear.

DR MARK GITTOS

themselves.

'Boobs Behaving Badly'

Freelance journalist Myjanne Jensen (Ngāti Kahu ki Whangaroa, Ngāpuhi) had always felt insecure about her breast size and struggled with feeling "not good enough". Despite wanting to get to the place where she felt confident in her skin as she was, she eventually decided to investigate breast implant surgery as an option.

Consulting with a plastic surgeon in Australia, where she was living at the time, Myjanne was told about breast implant-associated anaplastic large cell lymphoma (BIA-ALCL), but no other significant risks.

After joining a few online groups of her surgeon's clients where she found it exciting to see their transformations, she one day noticed someone posting about BII, and her curiosity was piqued.

This led her to other groups where wāhine were sharing "horrific" experiences with the illness.

She was inspired to dive into a professional investigation of the illness and the women affected by it.

Her 2021 documentary for ABC National Radio, Boobs Behaving Badly: the dark side of breast implants, featured women whose experience of having breast implants brought on a host of symptoms similar to Rachel's, that were also remedied once they were removed.

Not fully informed

"All the women felt they hadn't been fully informed of the risks (of getting implants)," Myjanne says in the documentary.

She also notes that in October 2020 the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) updated their recommendations