Breast Implants – Frequently Asked Questions

What is a breast implant?

Breast implants are prosthetic containers generally filled with either saline or silicone gel. Both have a silicone shell. Both are used for reconstructive surgery where a woman’s breast has been removed or for breast augmentation for cosmetic surgery.

What are breast implant risks?

Saline and silicone breast implants have similar risks. They include: breast pain, changes in breast sensation, internal scarring, implant leakage or rupture and the need for further breast surgery.

More detailed risks are discussed here: www.medsafe.govt.nz/consumers/devices/silicon.asp

What are rupture rates for breast implants?

The shells of breast implants have a relatively small failure rate. This includes Poly Implant Prothése (PIP) implants which have recently been the subject of a recall in some countries overseas. PIP implants have a failure rate (rupture or leak) of around 0.4 percent for every year of implant, which is comparable to similar implants.

What happens if an implant ruptures?

If a saline breast implant shell ruptures, the implant deflates and the leaking saline solution is absorbed without posing any health risks, but the silicone shell can only be removed with surgery.

If a silicone breast implant (this includes a PIP implant) ruptures, there may be no obvious change.

There’s no evidence that leaking silicone gel causes serious, long-term health problems.

In some instances a ruptured silicone breast implant may eventually cause breast pain or changes in the shape of the breast. If this happens, you’ll need surgery to remove the ruptured implant.

Are there any health concerns associated with breast implants?

There have been concerns that implants may increase the risks of some disease including cancer and connective tissue diseases; however, the generally accepted view is that these are no more common in women with breast implants, than in women without implants.

What follow up and ongoing medical care do I need if I have breast implants?

Follow-up care is generally provided by the surgeon and would usually involve an annual check-up.

What are the warning signs or symptoms that suggest breast implant rupture?

Most women have no signs or symptoms following a rupture. However, some women may experience:

- pain, burning, tingling, swelling, numbness or redness in the affected breast
- hard knots or lumps surrounding the implant or in the armpit
- change in breast size or distorted breast shape
- softening or hardening of the breast

If you have silicone breast implants and experience these signs or symptoms, consult your surgeon
Why is there concern around PIP implants?

PIP implants are silicone-gel breast implants manufactured by the French company Poly Implant Prosthese (PIP). These implants were approved under the European regulatory system and were widely used in a number of countries.

In March 2010 French authorities learned that the company had used unapproved industrial-grade silicone filler instead of medical-grade silicone required under regulatory approval. A global recall of all PIP silicone breast implants was announced and clinicians advised to no longer use these implants for breast implantation.

There were no records of their importation into, or distribution in New Zealand. However it has emerged a now-retired Wellington surgeon implanted PIP implants in 18 women in 2002 and 2003.

PIP implants have not been used for reconstructive surgery in the public health system. It is possible however that PIP implants may have been personally imported and used by other medical practitioners.

How are medical devices registered in New Zealand?

Since 2004 it has been a regulatory requirement for suppliers of medical devices (including breast implants) in New Zealand to notify details of their devices to a database known as the Web Assisted Notification of Devices, or WAND, database maintained by Medsafe. To date there have been no notifications to the database for breast implants manufactured or filled by PIP.

Read more here:

Are PIP implants a risk to my health?

Women with a PIP breast implant may be concerned about possible risks.

Breast implant testing by regulators in France, Australia, and the UK and subsequent review of data by expert committees, has so far found no evidence of harm or toxicity associated with the filler used inside the PIP implants. The data does not indicate the filler in a PIP implant can cause cancer.

On this basis, the health risks from a PIP implant is no different from that of any other breast implant.

Women with PIP implants also need to consider the risks of surgery to remove the implant as this may be greater than the risk posed by the PIP implants. Removal of a PIP or any other breast implant is only recommended where a patient’s doctor/surgeon believes it necessary due to rupture or other health concern.

How can I find out what type of implant I have?

Your implant surgeon will know the type and brand of your implant. Contact them where possible. If you cannot contact your surgeon, contact your GP for a referral to a plastic surgeon if appropriate.

Who do I talk to about if I think I have a PIP implant?

The Ministry of Health and the New Zealand Association of Plastic Surgeons are working together to ensure concerned women are able to access appropriate care. As part of this, the Ministry has provided advice to health professionals. You can see that advice here:

Talking with your GP or original plastic surgeon, or referral to one is how decisions can be made that are appropriate to your individual situation. It’s important to note that while it is understandable for
there to be heightened anxiety if you have had or think you may have had PIP implants, there is no evidence to date that you are at risk.

If you have had or think you may have had PIP implants, there are a number of possible situations you might find yourself in:

1. **I had implants done by a surgeon who I believe is a member of the NZ Association of Plastic Surgeons.**
   Please contact your implant surgeon. If you have difficulty finding them, or they have moved, contact NZAPS. They also have a member register at: [www.plasticsurgery.org.nz/find-a-surgeon](http://www.plasticsurgery.org.nz/find-a-surgeon)

2. **I think I may be a former patient of the Wellington surgeon.**
   Please contact NZAPS. They can refer you to the practice which holds the records that can identify if you are an affected patient, and tell you what type of implant you received.

3. **I had implants by a doctor, who wasn’t a member of the NZAPS - and I can’t find them.**
   Please see your GP for referral to a plastic surgeon if appropriate. You may also have been given documentation at the time concerning your implant type.

4. **As above, but I know how to contact the doctor.**
   Please contact them.

5. **I had an implant procedure done while I was overseas.**
   Please contact your GP for referral to a plastic surgeon where appropriate. You may also have been given documentation at the time concerning your implant type.

**Do I have to pay for advice or treatment?**

PIP implants were not used in public health procedures.

Our advice to health professionals is that generally, patients who have privately funded medical treatment should continue with their private treatment for any follow up.

However, there may be situations where this is not appropriate or possible, and, depending on your discussions with your GP or surgeon, you may be referred to the public health system.

Treatment in the public system would be on the same basis as treatment of any other individual with a breast implant – on the basis of clinical need.

**Could I get ACC cover?**

Please contact the Accident Compensation Corporation: [www.acc.govt.nz](http://www.acc.govt.nz)

**More information**

More information from the New Zealand Association of Plastic Surgeons and overseas medical device regulators concerning PIP breast Implants


Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA):


UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Authority (MHRA):
