

The Ethics of Prophylactic Mastectomies

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Background: Breast cancer is diagnosed in more than 200,000 women annually in the U.S. Research has identified risk factors placing individuals at increased risk, including genetic mutations that increase life-time risk to greater than 60 percent. Many individuals elect prophylactic mastectomies as a method of risk reduction.

Aims: Explore the underlying ethical issues involved in prophylactic breast surgery.

Considerations: The key underlying ethical principles involved in prophylactic surgery are totality, bodily integrity, and proportionality. Pope Pius XII in 1953 enunciated the circumstances in which surgical removal of a healthy organ would respect totality and bodily integrity. Prophylactic mastectomy to reduce the high risk of developing future breast cancer in high risk individuals meets these ethical criteria. Additionally, prophylactic mastectomy in this circumstance respects the principle of proportionality.

Conclusions: Prophylactic mastectomy is consistent with sound ethical principles as a method of risk reduction in women at high risk of developing breast cancer.