

# your bod, babe!

## A more natural option

A new procedure for breast reconstruction uses patient's tissue

BY JULIAN KESNER

**T**here's a dramatic new procedure for women facing mastectomy.

For Nina Ziomek, it was a must.

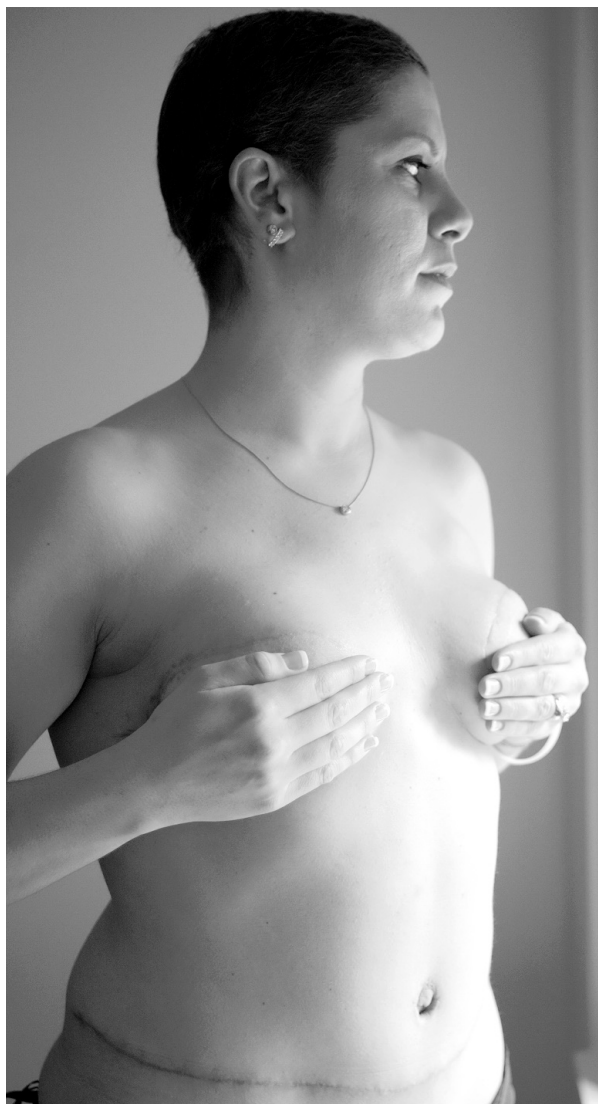
The 31-year-old discovered she was pregnant weeks after being diagnosed with breast cancer. After her mastectomy, the Weathersfield, Conn., mom opted for the DIEP flap, a breast reconstruction surgery she heard about

while undergoing chemotherapy.

Unlike the more common TRAM flap procedure, where an abdominal muscle is removed (along with the surrounding skin and fat) and used to rebuild the breast, the DIEP flap leaves abdominal muscle in place, and takes only skin and fat to create the new breast.

Abdominal vessels are then microsurgically reattached to the mammary artery and vein, providing blood and nutrients to the relocated fat. Similar surgeries also can be done utilizing the buttock instead of the abdomen.

Now Ziomek happily uses her intact belly muscle to pick up her 7-month-old son. She was back at work in less than two weeks, and loves that she has "pretty much a real breast — it's your own skin, your own fat, your own everything." She also was anti-implant. "I



**HAPPY WITH HER DECISION** Nina Ziomek, six weeks after undergoing a DIEP flap, a breast reconstruction.



PHOTOS BY TALISMAN BROLIN

would rather have myself in there," she says.

"A lot of the people at the infusion center considered implants as their only choice," she adds. "Nobody knows about this kind of surgery. I just kept asking my oncologist if there was something else I could do."

Nereida Torres of the Bronx had a TRAM flap and an implant — the implant turned out badly — before discovering the DIEP flap.

### LEAVING THE MUSCLES ALONE

"I wish I had heard about it before," says Torres, 56. "I probably would have gone with that first."

Torres' case is a common one. DIEP stands for deep inferior epigastric perforator, the name of an abdominal artery. But many women going for breast reconstruction don't know about the DIEP flap surgery.

The reason: Few plastic surgeons are properly trained to perform it.

"When I found out [TRAM flap surgery] actually removes half of your abdominal six-pack, that was absolutely unacceptable," says Betty Ditillo, 51, a nurse practitioner who instead underwent a DIEP flap reconstruction last week at New York Eye & Ear Infirmary.

"I don't want any muscles cut out. That was just not an option to be considered."

Ditillo chose Dr. Joshua Levine, a Manhattan plastic surgeon who, along with Dr. Heather Erhard in the Bronx, trained with the surgeon who helped pioneer the procedure. Erhard estimates only 25 or so plastic surgeons nationwide regularly perform DIEP flaps.

Because a DIEP flap is a more difficult operation, "it's typically not offered," says Levine. "That means the patients who come here are extraordinarily well-researched."

"It's only skin and fat," he continues. "It's a dramatic advantage over sacrificing muscle, which can cause a lot of postoperative pain and recovery. And would you rather preserve or sacrifice your muscle?"

Torres found the DIEP flap postop recovery much less painful than her other surgeries. She also hated the implant she briefly tried.

"I wasn't happy with it," she says. "It was very hard to the touch, and it felt like it was leaning against my rib cage. And it didn't look real."

A downside of the DIEP flap procedure is its cost: It can run upward of \$30,000 per breast. Federal law requires insurance covers breast reconstruction, though many companies use loopholes to avoid paying.

Only a small percentage of Ditillo's DIEP flap surgery is being covered. "I dismissed the saline implants, which wouldn't have cost me a penny," she says, "so I tried to think into the future when it's all done and paid for. The financial inconvenience is temporary."



**NO IMPLANTS** Betty Ditillo with Dr. Joshua Levine a day before surgery.

## A RARE RESOURCE

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 57,778 breast reconstruction surgeries took place in 2005, with implants far and away the most popular choice; 9,578 were TRAM flaps, and only 1,109 were DIEP flaps.

For Dr. Joshua Levine, call (212) 245-8140 or visit [www.diepflap.com](http://www.diepflap.com). Dr. Heather Erhard in the Bronx can be reached at (718) 405-7500 or by visiting [www.bronxplasticsurgery.com](http://www.bronxplasticsurgery.com).