



By
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WHAT A PAIR: Jon before the treatment, with wife Claire

When Jon Cullen was told by his daughter that his breasts were bigger than his wife's, there was only one thing for it...



BREAST ISSUE: Jon Cullen's man boobs have disappeared thanks to the new laser treatment

The Moob Job

(and there's not a scalpel in sight)

I was the kind of withering home truth only a child could deliver. 'Dad - your boobs are bigger than Mummy's!' exclaimed Harriet, Jon Cullen's 13-year-old daughter, while on the beach in Spain earlier this year.

At the time, the 47-year-old company director laughed off the comment. But now he confesses: 'Harriet was right. My wife Claire had never said anything but I had always been conscious of my chest. I never wore T-shirts because they were so unforgiving, but there was no way of covering up on the beach.'

Jon, who lives in Buckinghamshire with Claire, also 47, Harriet and their other child, Morgan, 17, is 5ft 11in and tips 137½ stone. He has a Body Mass Index (BMI) - a height-to-weight ratio used by doctors to identify obesity - of about 26, making him only slightly overweight.

'As a younger man I'd been quite proud of my athletic physique,' he explains. 'Until I had a family. I went to the gym three times a week and played football regularly. But gradually that dwindled to nothing. Like most men of my age, I was a bit bigger round the middle than I would have liked, and I'd developed what people unkind refer to as moobs - man boobs. When my daughter said what she did, I knew I had to do something about it.'

Excessive development of male breasts - also known as gynecomastia - is thought to affect about a third of men at some point and it seems the figures are rising. These estimates are based on numbers of clinical diagnoses and it is thought that many men may be too embarrassed to seek medical help.

High-profile sufferers include Tony Blair, Jack Nicholson, Robbie Williams and Jonathan Ross. But what exactly are moobs? Are they just fat or can slim men get them, too?

The growth typically consists of a combination of hard breast tissue similar to that found in women and adipose tissue (fat). The condition is often seen during puberty as a result of imbalances in hormones. In teenagers, male breast tissue usually shrinks without any medical intervention within a year.

Gynecomastia can also be triggered by certain medication, including some steroids. Although not painful or harmful, in rare cases gynecomastia can signal a more serious underlying health problem such as testicular cancer.

Male breast prominence due solely to excessive fat is often called pseudo or false-gynecomastia. In these cases, weight loss alone can be a remedy - although fitness experts claim it is particularly difficult to lose fat from the chest area. This means that often men who lose weight will end up with a 'top-heavy' appearance.

If no weight loss occurs, then after two to three years the fat can harden - meaning that weight loss alone will no longer get rid of it. In severe cases, in which large amounts of hard tissue are present, surgery may be the only option. Indeed, increasing numbers of men are opting for chest liposuction procedures or 'moob jobs', in which fat is surgically removed using a cannula (a hollow metal tube) and a suction device called an aspirator.

Consultant plastic and reconstructive surgeon Dalia Nield, an expert in the surgical treatment of gynecomastia, explains: 'Today we use a combined approach in treating excessive male breasts.'

'We can remove the fatty element with liposuction, but there is often very hard tissue made up of ducts similar to those found in the female breast directly under the

nipple. To remove this, an incision is made along the lower border of the areola, the coloured ring that surrounds the nipple, and the tissue is removed with a scalpel. The results are excellent.'

Just 22 men had the operation in 2003. By last year that figure had surged to 323, with a 44 per cent increase from the previous year. Experts expect to see a similar rise this year. The figures were released by the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons which represents one in three of the profession, so the real figure could be much higher.

But all surgery carries risks. Aside from the chance of infection that exists with any operation, short-term bruising and painful swelling, the incisions can leave scars, and a compression garment must be worn for up to a month after the procedure in order to avoid lumpy skin.

For Jon, surgery was out of the question as he hated the idea of going through any pain. Yet thanks to a new non-invasive procedure, he is now rid of his moobs as well as two inches from his chest.

He tried out a new treatment when Laser Lipo, the Kent cosmetic clinic where he is a director, began marketing the Strawberry, a device that promises to tone the chest and 'banish' moobs in just 40 minutes.

The Strawberry consists of a large Velcro belt lined with laser-emitting diodes that can be strapped around almost any part of the body.

It may sound like hokum, but the type of laser used - known as a cold red laser - was initially approved by the US Food and Drug Administration, the medical product regulatory agency, for use in physiotherapy to alleviate swelling. But there was an unexpected side effect. Practitioners noticed that fat was lost from those areas treated.

Today the lasers are approved for cosmetic use by the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), and are commonly used by surgeons in combination with liposuction to improve the results.

'When we first received the device last month, the therapists were keen to try it out and asked

me if there was any body part I wanted toning,' says Jon. 'At first I was embarrassed - although I am involved in the beauty business I don't even use a moisturiser - but I finally admitted my chest was one area that needed work.'

Lasers have been used for inch loss for about five years, but the Strawberry's Essex-based manufacturer, Omega, claims it is the most advanced and effective treatment of its kind. It works on the fat beneath the skin.

Fat is also found around the internal organs or in the bone marrow, but it is the superficial layer that gives the appearance of being overweight. The tissue is made up of adipocytes - cells that can convert energy obtained from the diet, storing it as liquid fat, then metabolise it back into energy when needed.

An average adult has 30 billion fat cells, weighing more than two stone. But when an adult gains excess weight, fat cells increase in size about fourfold before dividing and increasing the absolute number present.

Clinic director Sharon Cobley, who has been using cold red lasers to aid slimming since they were introduced three years ago, says she has treated more than 500 men for chest and stomach reduction.

She explains: 'The laser penetrates the skin, and enters the fat cells causing them to release their contents, which are then processed and excreted via the lymphatic system and the liver.'

After the treatment, which lasts no more than 20 minutes, clients are encouraged to undertake up to an hour of moderate cardiovascular exercise.

'For the male chest area we get them doing press-ups for as long as they can, then it's on to the treadmill,' says Cobley.

'We can also treat eye bags, the

stomach, muffin tops, thighs, even jowls. If a client has a pre-existing health condition such as diabetes, which can affect their circulation and ability to heal, or liver problems, we tell them to speak to their doctor before having treatment.'

But why is there no loose skin after treatment? 'The reduction is gradual and no tissue is removed -

the lasers just shrink what is there,' says Cobley. 'The effect is instant, and most clients can expect to lose more than 5in around the chest, depending on the severity of their problem.'

A course of four treatments is

recommended and costs about £500 - chest liposuction costs upwards of £2,000. Laser Lipo supplies about 60 clinics in the UK. Jon underwent one treatment a week for a month and is thrilled with the results.

'I lay on the treatment table

with my top off, while the belt was strapped round my chest. It gradually warmed up but felt quite pleasant, like a hot-water bottle. My chest was 44in to start with; now it is 42in.'

But Dalia Nield, who treats about 30 gynecomastia patients every year, is sceptical this treatment will help all sufferers.

'Lasers alone have good results when the breast is made up of only fat,' she says. 'But if there is hard tissue and you just remove the fat, the patient can still be left with breast-like protrusions. In these cases, surgery will still be needed.'

David Ross, head of plastic surgery at Guy's, St Thomas' and King's College Hospital in London, agrees. 'Gynecomastia is hard to treat even with conventional liposuction. I'd welcome an effective non-invasive treatment but this technology is still a work in progress and we need to see more evidence that it works before recommending it to patients.'

But for Jon, the results have been a revelation. 'I didn't tell my wife - and she didn't notice at first. But Harriet did. My shirts used to strain around the chest, but now they're pretty roomy. I have even bought some T-shirts.'

'My male friends are all impressed. A couple have lost weight since taking up cycling but the chest area seems to be

the last thing to tone up, so I can imagine they'll be keen on having the treatment.'

'Seeing how much better I look has inspired me to start going to the gym again, too. Don't get me wrong, I never sat at home crying about my moobs - life's too short. But it is great to feel good about myself again.'

• www.strawberry-laser.com