

Current Trends of Breast Reconstruction in South Korea

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Breast cancer, accounting for 15.4 percent of all cancers in women, is the second most common malignancy in women in South Korea. Population aging and lifestyle westernization have led to a steady increase in the incidence of breast cancer.

Before 2006, the most common surgical management of breast cancer was mastectomy; however, the rate of breast conserving surgery has been slowly increased, and as a result, 62.3 percent of breast cancer patients were treated by breast conserving surgery in 2015.

In addition, due to the higher incidence of breast cancer, there has been an increase in mastectomy and breast reconstruction over the last decade. In South Korea, the National Health Insurance Service (NHIS) began covering breast reconstruction in April 2015. This change in health care system coverage had a considerable impact on breast reconstruction trend, and the pace of increase in breast reconstruction certainly accelerated after the expansion of NHIS coverage. The breast reconstruction after mastectomy is currently regarded as a routine option for patients with breast cancer under the NHIS in South Korea.

Nowadays, most of the breast reconstruction procedures have been performed immediately after mastectomy. In the past, most immediate breast reconstruction procedures used autologous tissue; however, more recently, the proportion of reconstructions using prosthesis has increased. This is in accordance with international trends since in the United States, tissue expander or implant-based reconstructions accounted for 81.10 percent of breast reconstruction procedures in 2016. In South Korea, direct-to-implant reconstructions are the most common procedures among implant-based reconstruction. This increase in prosthesis-based reconstruction can be explained by improvement in implant, relatively shorter operating duration and recovery period.

In conclusion, the number of breast cancer patients and breast reconstruction procedures have been steadily increased over the last decade in South Korea. Furthermore, after the coverage of breast reconstruction by NHIS, the breast reconstruction procedure has become more common as a result of decreased costs for surgery. In the future, breast reconstruction will be provided as a routine option for patients with breast cancer.

