

# THE MYSTERY OF MALE NIPPLES

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**I LOVE PEOPLE WATCHING. JUDGING SOMEBODY'S ENTIRE LIFE BASED ON A BRIEF GLANCE IS A GREAT AND GUILTY PLEASURE OF MINE.**

I do this particularly defensively when in clothing stores with my female friends, and somehow that one situation puts me right into full douchebag mode. I instantly start comparing myself to the other guys standing around awkwardly, and analyse their relationships.

It's in one of these situations that I notice a man with a particularly tight, thin shirt. It happens to be an extremely cold day. You do the math.

I make a remark to my friend, who's otherwise occupied with a rack of dresses. She takes a quick look over her shoulder and shrugs. "All guys have nipples."

This single absent-minded comment blows my mind wide open.

Go on, take a minute to think about it. Why do men have nipples? No, really. Why?

I like to consider myself a rather curious person, so it's with some shame that I admit I never asked. That's just the way things are. All people have nipples, just like all people have noses that point outwards or eyelids that close along a horizontal line. But I can hardly believe it, thinking about it now, because it just doesn't make any sense. Males and females have a rather different set of equipment from the moment they're born, but for tens of thousands of years nature has seen fit to deliver baby boys with nipples. That just seems like a catastrophically bad idea.

If you'll let me indulge in sensationalism ripped straight from the minds behind *A Current Affair*, I'd like to make a point. While markedly less common than in females, males can develop breast cancer. Although seemingly useless, man-tits are potentially deadly. It's a bit like the appendix, or most of Australia's landmass.

So in horses, mice, and a selection of other mammals, the males dodge the burden of breasts completely, but why not humans? I did a little poking around, and the answer is even more confounding.

To put it simply, we develop nipples before our cells have even decided to start making a male or female. They are so absolutely essential to reproductive success that evolution seems to have taken a 'why not?' approach. But it's not just 'why not pop some bits on everyone's chest?' it's 'why not let everyone lactate?'

The master of evolution himself, Charles Darwin, noted early humans probably encouraged both genders to breastfeed. The *Descent of Man* reads: "Long after the progenitors of the whole mammalian class had ceased to be androgynous, both sexes yielded milk, and thus nourished their young."

**IF THE MAGAZINES THAT LITTER THE HAIRDRESSER'S READING TABLE ARE ANY STANDARD TO JUDGE BY, BREASTFEEDING APPEARS TO BE A CONSTANT TOUCHSTONE FOR SOCIAL DEBATE. IS IT APPROPRIATE IN PUBLIC? TO WHAT AGE SHOULD IT BE ENCOURAGED? TO WHAT AGE TOLERATED? IS IT NECESSARY FOR A CHILD'S PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT? BUT NOBODY ASKS, "WHY DON'T WE GET MEN TO DO IT?" PROBABLY BECAUSE THEY DON'T REALISE MEN CAN.**

Of course there's the slightly more unusual ways men can lactate. *Witch's Milk* is a phenomenon that occurs when a newborn receives milk producing proteins during childbirth. It's not enough to do any major damage, but it's enough to make them dribble milk all over themselves for the next four weeks.

The even more awkward spontaneous lactation can occur in older men when they are subjected to extreme stress or starvation. The hormones get funny, testosterone levels fall and the body suddenly decides it's time to be a real woman. Unfortunately the 55 year old man still has a penis and ends up more confused and ashamed than fulfilled as a mother.

Then there's induced male breastfeeding. In a rare moment for Wikipedia, the information is both hilarious and true: "Many men have been known to breastfeed their young after

a month of intensive nipple stimulation." Juvenile humour aside, that particular detail is rather surprising. The way it works is to do with chemical response to the presence of a newborn near the breast, but it boils down to a simple truth. If you attempt to suckle a baby, at some point your body will make you able to. It doesn't care whether you're a man or a woman. If the baby needs milk, you're going to deliver.

Tales of this occurrence are all over the place, but Mr. Wijeratne's takes the cake. The 38 year old Sri Lankan man tragically lost his wife through birth complications, but that

left him alone with two infant daughters and no mother to feed them. For months he suckled both daughters, who remained healthy on his milk. And you can take a look for yourself, but he's not exactly sporting a hefty pair of knockers.

But more interesting than all these oddities of male lactation is the implication

they have on how we understand people. Human society - Western society in particular - is fundamentally patriarchal. Men are the ruling class. You can applaud the merits of growing gender equality all you want - and there's no doubt it's getting better - but to deny the separation of the sexes is beyond ignorant.

Look at the English language: *mankind* will leave *his* mark on the world. Look at our creation myths: Eve was taken from the rib of Adam. It was internationally newsworthy that Australia elected a female Prime Minister, no matter her actual political value. Much of our society revolves around male as the naturally superior, the norm, the 'default,' and female as the other.

And yet the nipples tell a very different story. Just a couple of little circles on the chest, but the only reason men have them is because they get them before their cells decide that

they are male. Milk lines and breasts are not just a part of the female anatomy, but a part of the human anatomy. By birth we default to female, and then the hormones take over a bit later.

Let me leave you with another anecdote. I was having a discussion with a group of friends about the way sport is covered. Unless you live under a rock in the Mariana Trench, you may have noticed that men's sport receives a bit more air time than women's. The few men I've ever heard argue that this should change were doing so for the promotion of beach volleyball, and I somehow doubt their intentions were entirely noble.

Regardless, this discussion sparked a raging battle of the sexes. All of a sudden the (normally socially progressive) guys were screaming that women weren't as physically capable, that men were just made superior athletes. The girls swung their own banner, retorting with insults and accusations regarding the mental capacity of the opposite sex. I really haven't seen anything like it since primary school.

But I do wonder what those guys would think had they known that - according to their nipples at least - they all started developing as women. Maybe a spot of breastfeeding would've awakened them to a little more compassion.