

AMPUTATION: THINGS YOU MIGHT WANT TO KNOW AND DO

by Lynn Brancato, President, **AMPUTEES ARE ABLE**

Based on my experience as an amputee for 25 years, my interactions with other amputees and their families as the leader of a number of amputee self-help groups, and my involvement with Californians for Disability Rights, several things come to mind that I want to share with you. My focus – *Each of us must be aware of and concerned about our bodies as we grow older.*

First, don't work at becoming sickly; instead, work at staying healthy and an active participant in your life. Stay involved, use your brain-power, and don't be consumed by worry – it's a waste of time. Try hard to avoid becoming an amputee. Above all, carefully. . . regularly look at your body and be aware of any changes – in your finger nails or toe nails; swelling in your hands, feet, or joints, sores and discoloration; and unusual growths. Touch yourself, particularly the soles of your feet and lower legs – make sure you can feel that touch, as well as pain, hot, and cold. Too many members of AMPUTEES ARE ABLE lost limbs because they didn't feel a shoe that was too tight, unknowingly stubbed a toe or stepped on a sharp object, or had a sore that didn't heal. Above all, tell your doctor about the changes you observe – let him or her determine if such changes are significant or require action

Second, if amputation is recommended, please learn as much as you can before the surgery is performed. You must be an active participant in managing your health care – don't let others make decisions for you! Ask questions, get a second opinion, examine your options. If amputation cannot be avoided, make sure if you have pain that it is dealt with before surgery – you should be pain-free before being 'put to sleep' – and, after surgery, that you are part of an aggressive wound healing program.

Third, even before surgery, begin gathering information about what type of prosthetic devices (artificial limbs) are available to you. Your research will introduce you to strange terms and new concepts: below-the-knee amputation, prosthetist, prosthesis, phantom pain, residual limb, medical necessity, etc. Know the meaning of each so you can participate fully in any discussions of your medical management and rehabilitation.

You need to be proactive in selecting the prosthetist who will make and fit your replacement limb and be well informed about the different parts and procedures he or she will use. You would not buy a car or a refrigerator without doing considerable research – the same level of investigation should be made concerning a prosthesis.

Life will go on – differently! Your return to home and family will be eased by knowing what is happening, what to expect, and how to adjust to life as an amputee. Become involved with a peer support program. Keep asking questions. Learn from those who have had similar experiences.

In summary: Try hard to avoid becoming an amputee. If amputation is inevitable, research your options and opportunities – It's your job to know as much as possible before, during, and after surgery.

Recovering from the amputation of a leg or an arm will not be easy. There will be times when you will want to give up – you will be angry, depressed, and hard to live with, but there is light at the end of the tunnel and it's not a train headed in your direction. You are not alone! Ask for help, accept the help that is offered – returning to life after an amputation is a process – others who have shared the amputation experience want to be there with you and for you. Giving back is part of life.

AMPUTEES ARE ABLE is a volunteer organization which provides peer support to persons who have had an extremity amputated, are otherwise "limb deficient," or are about to undergo amputation surgery, as well as their families and significant others:

- By calling on recent amputees, as well as those facing surgery, who request visits. (You will find our visitors to be understanding and ready to help. Above all, they are good listeners who, through their own amputation experience, have found the answers to many of the questions you may be asking.)
- By providing a forum in which members can encourage each other, share feelings and experiences, and demonstrate that there is life after amputation.
- By offering educational programs for amputees, their families and significant others, those who provide services to amputees, and the public in general.
- By advocating for the rights, care, and rehabilitation of individual amputees.
- In other ways, by enhancing the lives and coping skills of those who have shared the amputee experience.

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