

# SEW 'N SHARE

## THE ANTI-OUCH POUCH

by Deon Maas

This underarm hanging pillow is intended to add a little comfort to people's lives during a stressful, painful time. The pillow hangs from the shoulder, fitting snugly under the arm to cushion the underarm and breast area after breast surgery or during radiation treatment. Its wedge shape holds the arm slightly away from the body when the person is standing. The shoulder strap is adjustable. The fiberfill can be adjusted via an overlapped opening. The design is meant to look like a tote bag, and may be used on the right or left side of the body.



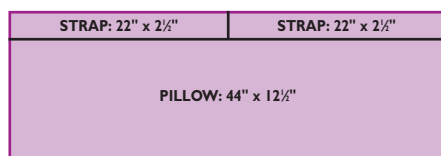
### Supplies

Note: Directions are for 44"-45" wide fabric. **Seam allowances are  $\frac{3}{8}$ ".**

- 15" of 44"-45" wide soft fabric, preferably cotton (18" for larger woman)
- Two large handfuls of fiberfill
- 6" of hook-and-loop tape, such as Velcro

### Cut

- Two  $2\frac{1}{2}$ " x 22" strips for straps
- One  $12\frac{1}{2}$ " x 44" section for pillow (for larger women, cut one  $15\frac{1}{2}$ " x 44" section)



### Straps

1. Fold each strap in half lengthwise, right sides together, creating a fold at one end.



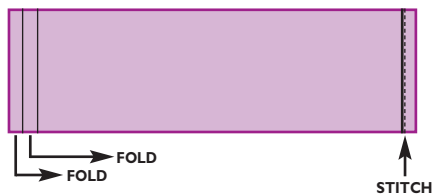
2. Sew or serge both long sides of each strap.
3. Turn straps right side out and press.
4. Place the loop side of the hook-and-loop tape on one of the straps and the hook side on the other strap, each  $\frac{1}{4}$ " from the folded end.



5. Stitch tape in place with either a straight or a zigzag stitch. If your machine skips stitches, try a larger needle.
6. Set straps aside.

### Pillow

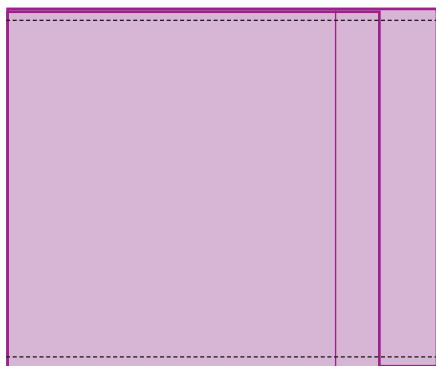
1. On the pillow section, make a double-fold hem at each end by pressing  $1\frac{1}{2}$ " of fabric to the wrong side. Press another  $1\frac{1}{2}$ " to the wrong side.



2. Stitch hem close to inside fold.
3. Place fabric *right side up*. Fold the hemmed ends inward, overlapping until each hemmed edge is approximately 2" from each folded edge.

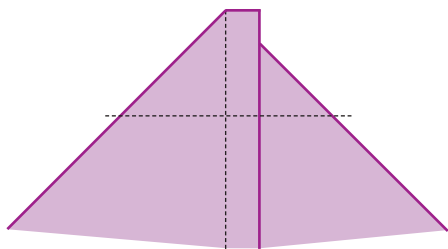


4. Sew or serge each side.



**Note:** Here comes the tricky part. You will now form the bottom edge of the pillow.

5. Working on the end that is shown on the left in the previous illustration (the edge with the hemmed end sandwiched between the fabric), maneuver the seam so that the corner forms a triangle, with the seam in the center.

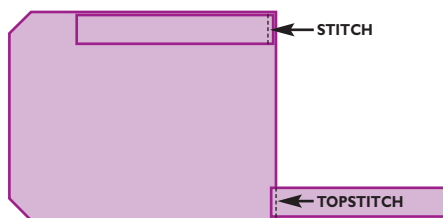


6. Stitch approximately  $1\frac{1}{4}$ " from point as shown. Make sure (by feel) that you do not "catch" the folded end that is sandwiched between the layers in this stitching.
7. Repeat for other corner of the same end.
8. Turn pillow right side out, gently poking out all four corners.

### Attach the Straps

1. Place one strap on top of each long edge of the pillow with the raw edges  $\frac{1}{8}$ " from the top edge. Make sure one strap has the hook-and-loop tape facing up and the other strap has the tape facing down.
2. Stitch each strap approximately  $\frac{1}{2}$ "

from the top edge, through all the layers.



3. Flip straps forward and topstitch them near the top edge of pillow.

### Stuff the Pillow

Please stuff the pillow *lightly* via the overlapped opening.

**Note to the sewer: If you have used pins during any part of the sewing, please check that all are removed!**

*Deon Maas is a high school art teacher and a member of the ASG Central Illinois Chapter. She welcomes any comments or suggestions for refinement. Contact her at [tommaas@winco.net](mailto:tommaas@winco.net).*

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Note: If you plan to make the Anti-Ouch Pouch as a community service project for a local hospital/breast care center, it's best to seek their approval before proceeding with the project.

To explain the Anti-Ouch Pouch to its recipient, photocopy and sign this paragraph, then cut it out and paste it to a 3" x 5" index card.

This "Anti-Ouch Pouch" was designed by Deon Maas and is dedicated to her mother, Doris Lock, who taught her to sew. Both women are breast cancer survivors and members of the American Sewing Guild. This soft pillow is designed to be worn snugly against the underarm area to cushion the area after breast surgery. The wedge shape gently holds the arm away from the body when the user is standing. The strap holds the pillow in place without having to use sore arm muscles to "clutch" it. The strap is adjustable and the fiberfill may be adjusted via the overlapped opening. This pillow was made by:



ANTI-OUCH POUCH UPDATE

by Deon Mass

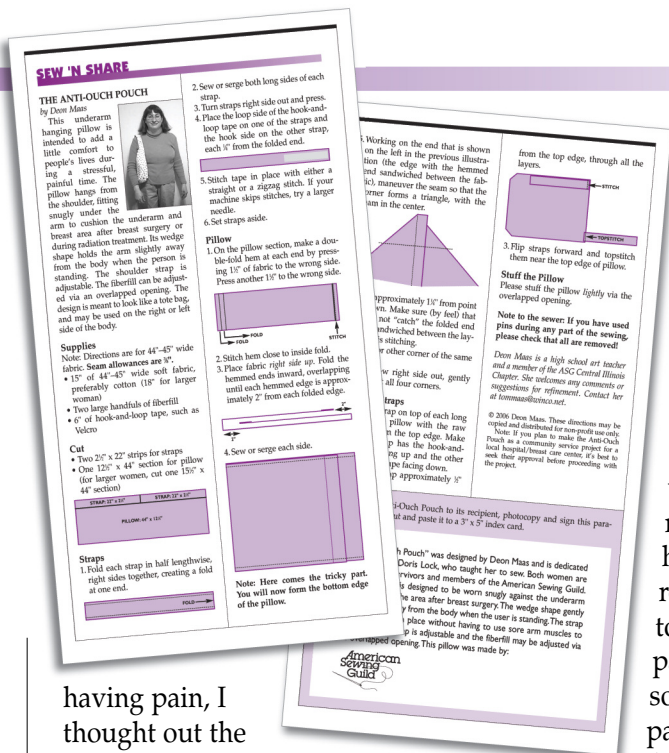
It has been nearly eight years since I was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a mastectomy. The first two weeks at home were routine, with me using pain killers and laying still, cushioning my surgical area and arm in fluffy pillows. When I started feeling like I wanted to do something such as cook, write on the computer, or sew, I found I had problems.

My mother had given me the mastectomy pillow she had been issued after her surgery, but I found it useless. It was hard as a rock, having been packed solidly with fiberfill. It hurt and felt like a huge lump under my arm. I got along better with a soft pillow that my sister-in-law had sent. Its fluffiness gently kept my sore arm away from my tender chest, but it was painful when I had to clutch it to hold it in place.

Since I was prone the first weeks after surgery, I had a lot of time to think. I had come from a farm family whose attitude was, "If we need it, we will just make it!" I was used to problem-solving. As I lay there, I carefully thought out what I could make that would solve the problems that came when I tried to stand with an ordinary small pillow under my arm.

First, I decided that I needed a pillow that was triangular in shape, so there was only a little padding in the underarm area where lymph nodes had just been removed, and a lot of padding at the elbow. This shape would hold my arm out at an angle, away from my body. Next, I thought of ways to keep the pillow in place and finally settled on having shoulder straps on the pillow. Lastly, it was obvious that the pillow needed to be filled with just enough fiberfill to nestle my arm and body, but not so much as to create a bump.

I was eager to try the design that was in my head but since I was still



having pain, I thought out the minimum steps needed to make my creation. By the time I was healed enough to sit at a sewing machine, I had streamlined the steps.

My new pillow instantly gave me back my normal life. By wearing it under my arm, sometimes under my clothes, I was able to do all those things I had been longing to do: cooking, writing, and sewing. I was astonished at how well the design worked and thought, "I wonder what other people's hanging mastectomy pillow designs look like." When I searched the Internet and found no other pillows like mine, I was incredulous.

After running the design past the local breast center representatives and my surgeon, I enlisted the aid of my local American Sewing Guild members to help me write the directions and to test the design. The name came from a fellow teacher, Sarah Brahmstedt, who asked how my "anti-ouchy pouchy" was coming along.

ASG National Community Service Project

The design was adopted as the ASG national community service project for 2008. Thousands of the pillows were sewn by volunteers that year

and continue to be donated to mastectomy patients nationwide. It brings tears to my eyes each time I think of the tens of thousands of women whose recovery from breast cancer was aided by my simple design and volunteer sewers' donation of time. When asked why I did not try to make money from my invention, I have two answers. The first reason is that I have no desire to profit from someone else's pain. However, the biggest reason was, as my former principal used to say, "It is a 'God thing.'" I had always felt that

the hand of God was present when I made the first Anti-Ouch Pouch (AOP), putting my problem-solving skills together with my need. The satisfaction of having made the world a better place is the only payment I'll ever want.

Beyond the Basic Instructions

I have learned that the need for these pillows has increased because of the new types of imaging which are discovering breast cancer in women at higher rates. What follows are some suggestions I have for sewers who are making Anti-Ouch Pouches for their local mastectomy patients. These have come about because of questions I've gotten over the years. The basic instructions for making the AOP can be found at [www.asg.org/files/projects/Anti\\_Ouch\\_Pouch.pdf](http://www.asg.org/files/projects/Anti_Ouch_Pouch.pdf).

**The Design.** Each part of the AOP is designed the way it is for very specific reasons, so be careful about changing the design, as one may inadvertently reduce its effectiveness or make it useless. For example, the hook-and-loop tape is 6" long, so the straps can be adjusted for many sizes

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## Anti-Ouch Pouch Update

(continued from page 26)

of women. Cutting the pieces shorter will change where the pillow will hang, thereby placing the padding in the wrong places. If the length of the hook-and-loop tape is reduced, then the length of the straps has to be shortened so the final pillow hangs with the narrow end cushioning the armpit.

**Embellishments.** Be cautious about adding embellishments or a pocket. After a mastectomy, not only are the surgical site and the underarm area sensitive, but the arm is often also affected and sensitive. The pillow is designed to gently support these areas and any added features, such as embroidery, might feel abrasive to the wearer.

**Use Soft Fabric.** Once again, the surgery areas are extremely sensitive and what may not feel abrasive to you *might* to the patient. I prefer woven cotton/cotton blend fabrics or flannel.

**Fabric Width.** The directions are for 45"-wide fabric. If wider fabric is used, it needs to be trimmed to 45" before proceeding, otherwise the pillow will end up too long. If using narrower fabric, just make the hems narrower.

**The Stuffing.** Fiberfill is the preferred stuffing. If using batting, please cut or tear it into smaller pieces. Lightly fill the pillow full of fiberfill, with more on the bottom and just a little in the top. The pillow should be very soft but should gently and evenly "nest" the arm and surgical area. A five-pound box of fiberfill will fill 50–60 pillows.

**AOP Kits.** Our local group, the Central Illinois ASG Chapter, makes kits to distribute to sewing volunteers. They also put each kit or completed pillow in a bag with the instructions. We have gotten new sewing volunteers by doing this. Feel free to add local contact information or local drop-off facilities to the

instructions.

**The Flap.** The access flap will work if it ends up "up" or "down," but I prefer "down" for easier filling and easier access for adjustment for the wearer.

**Sloping Shoulders.** People with sloping shoulders may need to pin the AOP in place at the shoulder.

**Cost of Supplies.** If the cost of supplies becomes prohibitive, hook-and-loop tape can be ordered in bulk, and other supplies are often gladly donated or sponsored once the word gets out about the project.

**Fabric Options.** I always try to make some plain black AOPs for professional woman or clergy and use "guy" fabric for men who've had chest surgeries. Children's fabric is perfect for little ones who have broken their arms.

*Deon Lock Maas, a member of the ASG Central Illinois Chapter, is a retired art teacher who designed the Anti-Ouch Pouch. She is also the author of "The Beagle and the Brain Tumor," a memoir about the two-year journey she and her late husband took to the "until death do us part" section of their wedding vows. They were accompanied by a beagle-basset rescue hound who played court jester on days there was little else to laugh about. Deon can be reached at [tommaas@mymctc.net](mailto:tommaas@mymctc.net).*

