



Body Contouring Helps Patients with New Body Image

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By Healthbeat Reporter Kay Quinn

(KSDK) -- Thanks to surgery and even good old-fashioned willpower; people who were once morbidly obese are now losing weight in greater numbers than ever before. But many are left with an unhealthy amount of extra skin once all of their extra weight is gone. This emerging trend is now causing plastic surgeons to reinvent an area of surgery called body sculpting or body contouring.

"It was like having a pair of panty hose. I almost feel like I need to get up and show you. I would literally stand in the mirror and it would be similar to pulling up a pair of panty hose. I literally had huge handfuls of skin I could pick up and lift," Cindy Brusca said.

Brusca, 46, twice lost more than 100 pounds only to gain it all back. Finally, a gastric bypass operation in January 2003 helped her go from a size 38 to a size 6. But losing 190 pounds in a year left her with a different kind of problem.

"I started having skin infections in my belly button and in the flap and folds of the skin," she explained. "It was very uncomfortable you know. I had to use creams constantly."

That's when she decided to have another type of surgery called body contouring. It's the surgical removal of often several pounds of excess skin. Doctors say this skin that doesn't shrink back down as dramatic weight is lost.

"It hangs over it folds. It gets wet. It's hard to perform hygiene, explains Dr. V. Leroy Young, chief of surgery and a plastic surgeon at Barnes-Jewish West County Hospital.

Dr. Young says bariatric surgeons and nutritionists have been more successful than ever before at helping people lose tremendous amounts of weight. But in reality, they've also helped create a new set of health issues. "And we really weren't prepared for it."

Most body contouring up until recently was done in people of normal weight. But plastic surgeons have found techniques used in those patients simply don't work for patients who used to be more than 100 pounds overweight.

"We're really evolving it as we go, because for example we really haven't come up on the optimal way to treat the upper chest," explains Dr. Young.

For the average patient, excess skin is removed in a series of three operations. At Barnes-Jewish West County Hospital, doctors work in teams of three, and the average operation lasts six to seven hours.

"So that really keeps it safe by reducing the operative time having multiple surgeons working on multiple sites," says Dr. Young.

Another patient Dr. Young and his colleagues operated on lost 140 pounds through diet and exercise. At five feet, five inches, she weighs 203 pounds today. Her goal: 155 pounds. Doctors will remove more than 17 pounds of excess skin in just a single operation.

"One of the toughest parts about this surgery is to get a good looking navel."

Common during body contouring is a procedure called a belt lipectomy, the removal of skin from around her midsection, and brachioplasty, or the removal of excess skin on the arms. Risks include post-surgical infection and the development of blood clots. The total cost: 60 thousand dollars for a series of operations that will remove unwanted skin, while leaving visible scars behind.

"I think the trade off is pretty easy for most patients to make," says Dr. Robert Centeno, a plastic surgeon and colleague of Dr. Young's at Barnes-Jewish West County Hospital.

Dr. Centeno says these patients are usually much more realistic about their surgical goals. "Many times, these people consider it a victory if they look good in clothes."

Now, these doctors want medical science to study how dramatic weight loss affects body image and psychiatric well-being. Cindy Brusca says she never lacked confidence, but admits her body contouring boosted her self-esteem.

"I would do it all again in a heartbeat, the gastric bypass surgery and the skin removal. I just feel incredible."

The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery believes patients undergoing gastric bypass operations aren't being properly informed about their eventual need for plastic surgery to remove excess skin.

You can read the organization's position on this issue at <http://www.surgery.org/press/news-release.php?iid=386>

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