



Everything Jersey

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Trimming fat

Liposuction -- the No. 1 cosmetic surgery -- is not for weight loss

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BY MEG NUGENT
Star-Ledger Staff

TO CELEBRATE her 50th birthday, Joyce treated herself to a couple of trips to a plastic surgeon to have liposuction done to her thighs, stomach, back and flanks.

She said she wasn't overweight, always ate healthily and exercised regularly by going to the gym and walking. Joyce, a mother of two grown children, decided she wanted to do something about those areas of her body that were carrying some excess fat but stubbornly resisted her diet and exercise regimen.

"Things were just not where they needed to be. When you're 50 and you've had two kids, things start to shift," said Joyce, who asked that her full name not be used to protect her privacy. "Liposuction gave me what I couldn't achieve by trying all the proper ways first."

With the oft-dreaded swimsuit season upon us, plastic and dermatologic surgeons see a spike in the number of patients asking about liposuction, a surgical procedure that removes fat deposits and reshapes the body. It's now the most commonly performed cosmetic procedure, with liposuction surgeries totaling 324,891 for 2004, according to statistics from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. Liposuctions surpassed nose jobs (305,475); breast augmentation (264,041); eyelid surgery (233,334) and facelifts (114,279), according to the society.

Despite its popularity, many people mistakenly believe liposuction is a sure way to instant, significant weight loss and that anyone is eligible for the procedure.

"I would recommend it only if you're eating right and you're exercising and you're doing it because you've done everything else," said Joyce. "Do not do it as a fast fix because it doesn't work. It's a tweaking, a cosmetic tweaking."

"A patient will, of course, lose some weight as a result of liposuction, perhaps a few pounds. But when we say it's not for weight loss, what we mean is, it's not a substitute for proper weight loss and exercise," said Caroline Glicksman, a plastic surgeon who practices in Sea Girt and Red Bank.

"The technique was designed to treat problem areas," she added, "not obesity."

The best candidate is a person of normal weight or who is within 10 to 15 percent of ideal body weight, and who has particular areas of the body that contain excess fat that doesn't respond to consistent, proper diet or exercise.

"There are people who've done all they can to lose weight, but they still have that bulge. We're trying to get that bulge into a nice, straight line," said Allen Rosen, a Montclair plastic surgeon, who performed Joyce's liposuction and who is a spokesman for the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

For women, those stubborn areas typically include the back, upper arms, stomach, hips, buttocks, thighs, knees, calves and ankles. Men usually undergo liposuction to get rid of love handles, abdominal fat, extra fat under their chin and, in some cases, to reduce the size of their breasts, a condition known as

gynecomastia.

You're a better candidate for liposuction if your skin has good elasticity, meaning it will quickly retract, as healing progresses after surgery, so that you're left without any hanging skin. "Liposuction will not tighten your skin," Glicksman cautioned, which means the procedure is not really for the person who has undergone massive weight loss and has a lot of loose skin as a result.

If you're considering liposuction for areas of the face, weight loss or gain doesn't usually affect the facial distribution of fat as it does the body, according to Ramtin Kassir, a facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon in Wayne who specializes in liposuction of the facial area and neck. "If you lost a lot of weight, you will lose a significant amount of weight in the body, less so in the face." In addition, said Kassir, "people tend to not gain a lot of it in their face. The most places where fat deposits are are on the body."

Even if you limit liposuction to your face, "we still want the patient to be on a program where they're eating healthy and are healthy in general," Kassir stressed. "Everyone recovers better and heals faster if they eat healthy and exercise."

Emmanuel Loucas, a dermatologic surgeon in Long Island, N.Y., said he wouldn't do a liposuction procedure on a woman who was planning on getting pregnant within two or three years, "especially if I was doing her abdomen and she would get pregnant six months later. The results might be compromised."

Liposuction is also ineffective on cellulite or stretch marks, Loucas said.

It's important to maintain your good eating and exercise habits after your surgery, too. Liposuction patients are three times more likely to gain weight without sticking with a proper diet and are four times more likely to gain weight without regular exercise, according to a study published in December in *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, the official medical journal of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

Rosen said liposuction involves the removal of fat cells, and fat cells don't regenerate in the body. But if you gain weight after liposuction, he said, the fat cells you still have can get larger. "You gain weight globally. All the existing fat cells take up the extra fat you gained."

The success of liposuction surgery also depends on how realistic your expectations are of what the surgery can do for you.

"You want somebody who is emotionally stable," said Loucas. "You should not be doing it because you just got divorced and your husband left you for his secretary and you're trying to make up for other aspects of your life by doing liposuction."

Since liposuction is invasive surgery, you want to make sure it's done by a physician with the proper qualifications. "The surgeon should be board-certified in their primary specialty and have adequate training to perform these procedures," he said.

While some doctors' professional societies may recommend training before performing liposuctions, no standardized training is required, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (www.fda.gov). The FDA suggested you can ask your doctor if he or she has had specialized training to perform liposuctions and what has been his or her experience with performing the surgery.