

Surgery eases pain, boosts esteem

► BREAST REDUCTION from ID

"It's going to make me more comfortable," she added. More comfortable in the gym, on the beach and on dates.

Surgery rates on the rise

Last year, more than 113,000 women underwent breast reduction surgery, that's up 137 percent from 1997, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.

Among females younger than 20, it ranks second behind nose jobs, as the most requested plastic surgery, with 2,983 reductions done last year. (By comparison, 2,953 girls in the same age group surgically added to their cup size that year).

And it is a procedure that is recognized almost equally for its ability to ease a woman's physical pain (think backaches, neck cramps, etc.), as well as improve self-esteem.

"These patients are truly among our happiest patients," says surgeon Dr. Jeff Wisnicki, who operated on Cate this summer. "They get the aesthetic benefits — they look better — and they feel better."

Unlike some procedures which have advanced so much you can do them on your lunch break, breast reduction remains one that requires going under general anesthesia for hours at a time and has the potential for significant scarring.

It is more complicated and often more expensive than breast augmentation, surgeons report.

And it can take weeks or even months for the breasts to heal, and for the swelling to completely recede.

"It hasn't been easy. But it was extremely worth it. I'd do it three more times over," says Cate, now in her fifth week of recovery.

Fat, tissue, skin removed

Typically, surgeons make an incision around the dark skin surrounding the nipple and then a vertical incision down from there to the base of the breast, says plastic surgeon Fred Barr.

Then, the surgeon removes not only fat, but glandular tissue and then takes out excess skin after some of the breast's bulk has been removed. This leaves a "lollipop" like scar.

While talk around the office cooler may indicate that the surgery will eventually interfere with a woman's ability to breast feed, surgeons report that reduction isn't a death sentence to nursing.

Done properly, the connections needed to lactate can be preserved and many women go on to nurse without any more difficulty than their peers, Barr said.

But extensive work can necessitate the surgeon to additionally cut laterally, leaving a scar that is more like an "anchor."

It's too soon to tell how Cate's wounds will heal. Some people's tissue hardens or reddens.

Carla Pisani says her scars have all but disappeared in the 19 years since she had her breasts reduced at age 30.

DID YOU KNOW?

A 2000 study published by the peer-reviewed 'Aesthetic Surgery Journal' found women who had undergone reductions reported:

- 93 PERCENT** improvement in their appearance
- 85 PERCENT** improvement in their self-esteem
- 84 PERCENT** improvement in posture
- 77 PERCENT** increase in activity level

The percent of those patients who were free of back pain went from **9 PERCENT before to 59 PERCENT after.**

95 PERCENT reported they had made the right decision in opting for the surgery

Her only regret? "I wish I would've done it when I was 19. It would've saved so much anguish, so much emotional stress," said Pisani, who now works for her surgeon and sometimes finds herself counseling young women seeking the same surgery.

Pisani says she was a skinny, flat-chested girl until she bloomed in high school.

"I remember walking down the hallway at school and someone saying something rude about teats. I couldn't believe they were talking about me."

Classmates teased and Carla took to covering up.

"I never wore low-cut shirts. I never wore a bathing suit without a T-shirt. I felt very ugly. Very disproportionate. Very insecure about my body."

As an adult, Carla visited five doctors before meeting Barr, who put her at ease about the huge step she was about to take.

"Dr. Barr was very, very, very careful to ex-

plain that scarring could be permanent, it could be red or lumpy. That this was serious surgery. We met three different times to talk about it," Carla recalled. "It was a really big step."

But once she took that step that took her out of 36 DD and into a 34 small C?

"Clothes fit. I felt sexier, happier. I started doing sports — yoga — my whole life changed," Carla says. "I would've taken any scars to feel comfortable in my skin."

Maturity is key

Carla wishes she'd done this at 19. Cate did it at 20. But is there an ideal time to proceed?

"If possible, you want to do it when you are sure you are done growing," Wisnicki said.

Adds Barr: "You want to wait for maturity of the breasts and maturity of the psyche. It's a lot to ask of a 14- or 15-year-old. That incision is for a lifetime. There's no way to erase it."

He said he prefers to wait until someone has reached at least 18 years old.

On the flip side, patients who wait until their 40s or 50s frequently wonder aloud why they waited so long to relieve themselves of the burden, Barr said.

"They've lived all those years with the neck and back and shoulder pain. Buying huge bras, so on and so forth," Barr said.

One hitch: while insurance often covered the surgery in the past, Barr says few insurers cover it now. The average cost: \$5,637.

Cate's family's insurance had a clause specifically declining to cover the surgery regardless of medical need, her mother, Angela Brecht, said.

But Cate can already see the difference. Her hair stylist wonders if she lost about 10 pounds. Her father says he can see her posture has improved. That V-neck dress she's wearing now shows off her hourglass figure, without giving away the cleavage.

And any day now, she's going to do something she couldn't have imagined doing before: "I'm going to go bra shopping in Victoria's Secret. I've never really been able to shop there."

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