



## **Post-Surgical Weight Loss: Your Guide to Body Contouring**

Have you experienced significant weight loss through bariatric surgery? If so, you're probably feeling healthier and happier than ever before. But, like many patients, there's just *one thing*... the excess skin that still remains.

Plastic surgery – sometimes referred to as post-bariatric body contouring – addresses this problem of excess skin. We invite you to use this guide to help answer your questions about plastic surgery. If you have additional questions that are not answered in the following pages, please feel free to call Southwest General Hospital at **1-877-215-WELL**.

### ***Why do bariatric surgery patients need body contouring?***

No matter how much you diet or exercise, the skin left behind after major weight loss doesn't go away. Think of it this way: skin is known for being **elastic**. It has a good amount of stretch to it – a little give and take. If you gain or lose a little muscle or fat, your skin can easily stretch to fit.

But, over time, your skin loses that elasticity. And, if it's been stretched out for months or years when you suddenly *lose* all of that excess weight, then it's impossible for the skin to “shrink” back up over the body. Elasticity is further decreased by:

- Age
- Certain genetic factors
- Sun exposure
- Smoking
- And, to a lesser degree, factors like diet, sleep, and stress

Between these factors and the notable loss of mass following bariatric surgery, many patients have reduced skin elasticity. As a result, patients turn to body contouring to finish the weight loss experience.

### ***What areas of the body are most affected?***

Folds of skin are common around the breasts, thighs, buttocks, back, upper arms, groin, face, and neck. However, the abdomen is the area most frequently affected. An overhanging flap of skin – known as a “pannus” – will usually hang from the abdomen all the way to the groin region or lower. After having gone through a long weight loss process, many people are eager to have the pannus removed once their weight has stabilized. The pannus doesn't *just* present aesthetic problems. It can also be quite uncomfortable, causing rash, skin irritation, and lower back pain. We'll talk more about the surgeries that treat excess skin in the following pages.

### ***Do I need to treat all of these areas?***

No, not necessarily. Some patients are bothered by multiple areas of overhanging skin, while others really only care about treating the pannus. Each patient's body is different. If you're uncertain about how which areas you'd like to treat, your plastic surgeon can help you come to a decision. During your consultation, the surgeon can help you prioritize areas and make decisions, based on the predicted results for different areas of the body.

### *How long after bariatric surgery do I have to wait?*

Most patients can have plastic surgery once they get as close to their target weight as possible and stabilize that weight for about three months. Precisely *when* this goal is achieved obviously varies from patient to patient. Generally speaking, surgery is possible around 12-24 months after bariatric surgery. If your plastic surgeon feels you are not quite ready for surgery, then he or she may refer you to a nutritionist or dietician for additional help.

There are several reasons why surgeons require patients to wait. From a practical point of view, you'll get better results the closer you are to your ideal weight. More importantly, undergoing surgery with a high BMI presents multiple risks and may interfere with the safety and effectiveness of the procedure. Also, patients who are still in the weight loss phase may be more prone to surgical infections and complications.

### *What are the alternatives to surgery?*

Unfortunately, there are no viable alternatives to post-bariatric surgery. The numerous topical creams and supplements on the market may help treat surface wrinkles and provide a minimal amount of skin tightening. However, no non-surgical treatment option can restore skin elasticity enough to replace cosmetic surgery.

### *But won't I have scars?*

Yes, there will be scarring, and you should be wary of any cosmetic surgeon who suggests otherwise. Nearly every cosmetic surgery presents a trade-off, but most patients consider a few scars to be preferable to folds of excess skin. Scars will fade and blend over time, especially if you follow your surgeon's post-op guidelines. Also, it's worth noting that a skilled plastic surgeon will try to leave scars in the natural folds and curvature of your skin, minimizing their visibility.

### *What's the best way to prepare for body contouring?*

The most successful patients tend to prepare physically, mentally/emotionally, and financially.

1. **Physical.** Before consulting with a surgeon, you should talk to your dietician (or primary care provider) about the supplements and nutrients you'll need before and after surgery. Your body needs all the nutritional help it can get for a successful recovery. Smokers should quit at least one month prior to plastic surgery.
2. **Emotional.** As you learned during the bariatric surgery process, major surgery can be emotionally difficult. Surround yourself with supportive friends and family. Take time to

evaluate your own reasons for choosing to have the procedure. It may help to write down your short-term and long-term goals. (Many patients find that reviewing these goals can help them through challenging times of recovery.)

3. **Financially.** Everyone's financial situation is different. However, many people use a finance plan to pay for the cost of surgery. (This is covered in more detail below.) Having a financial plan can alleviate stress. (We'll talk more about insurance below.)

### *How should I choose a plastic surgeon?*

Carefully! Your plastic surgeon should be board certified and trained and experienced in treating all relevant areas of the body. Ask your prospective surgeon for before and after photos of past patients he or she has treated. In some cases, it may be possible to even speak with past patients to learn about their experience with the surgeon.

### *What goes on during the consultation?*

A basic medical evaluation will be performed. This includes taking your vitals, calculating your BMI, evaluating your nutritional status, and asking questions about your weight loss and medical history.

After discussing your weight loss history and goals, your surgeon may present you with some options. Different strategies and approaches – such as combination and custom procedures – may be discussed. You will also have the opportunity to ask your plastic surgeon any questions you may have about the surgery. Lastly, your surgeon may ask to photograph you for documentation and insurance purposes.

### *What is the surgical experience like?*

The surgical and recovery experiences vary widely from patient to patient. However, this guide can give you a good idea of what to expect of different procedures. Eight types of procedures are covered below.

## ***ABDOMINOPLASTY (TUMMY TUCK) & PANNICULECTOMY***

The tummy tuck is one of the most common cosmetic procedures for post-bariatric surgery patients. As discussed above, its benefits go beyond mere cosmetics and extend to hygiene and physical comfort. This surgery is performed under general anesthesia and typically takes between one and two hours.

During the procedure, a horizontal incision is made between the groin region and the navel; your surgeon will choose a location for the incision based on the natural curves of your body. Once weakened abdominal muscles have been repaired, the surgeon will remove any excess fat, tissue, and skin. Depending on your body shape, an additional incision may be made in the upper abdomen to remove more tissue. The incisions are closed and drainage tubes may be inserted to help with recovery.

The recovery phase is about six weeks long. However, many patients will return to work between two and four weeks (assuming no heavy lifting or physical stress is involved).

### ***ARM LIFT (BRACHIOPLASTY)***

After experiencing significant weight loss, you may have loose skin around the upper arms. A brachioplasty slims the arms and instills a new confidence in patients who never would have gone out sleeveless before. This procedure may take anywhere from one to three hours; general anesthesia is used.

In the procedure, a long incision is made on the inside of the arm from just under the armpit to just above the elbow. If necessary, fat may be excised or treated with lipoplasty techniques. The incision is then closed with absorbable sutures or stitches. The scars will not be visible when arms are at rest by your sides.

The recovery phase is about one to two weeks for patients who do not have to do any kind of heavy lifting. Patients who do heavy lifting are advised to wait at least four weeks.

### ***BREAST AUGMENTATION / LIFT / REDUCTION***

Post-bariatric patients may need a breast lift or a breast reduction, depending on body type and weight loss. Also, it is not uncommon for some patients to need breast implants along with the lift, considering the breast tissue-to-skin ratio that sometimes follows bariatric surgery.

These procedures are performed under general anesthesia and can be completed in just a few short hours. Recovery time is typically one to two weeks for light work and four weeks for lifting work.

### ***FACE & NECK LIFT***

Many patients who have experienced significant weight loss have excess skin in the face and neck. This skin can cause discomfort, especially in the heat of the summer. Also, many patients are unhappy with saggy jowls and folds below the chin. A face and/or neck lift can help you look and feel more comfortable. These procedures are performed under general anesthesia.

During a traditional facelift, incisions are made around the hairline, from the temples down past the ear. Depending on your anatomy, your surgeon may be able to perform the facelift using only incisions around the ears. When combined with a neck lift, these procedures can really improve your appearance, helping you look better than ever.

Most patients experience bruising and swelling for about two weeks after these procedures.

### ***LIPOSUCTION***

Liposuction is a technique that uses small hollow tubes to suction out excess fat. While this procedure won't help with tightening skin (the primary goal for post-bariatric surgery patients) it may be used in conjunction with another procedure on this list for improved results. Patients

undergoing an arm lift, for example, might also have liposuction in order to maximize the procedure's effectiveness.

### ***MALE GYNECOMASTIA***

A lot of men who have achieved significant weight loss still have extra breast tissue. This tissue can be removed via excision or liposuction, depending on the patient's specific anatomy. This procedure is performed under general anesthesia.

During liposuction, small incisions are made in the breast tissue. Small tubes are inserted to loosen the excess fat, which is suctioned out. During excision, incisions are made in the breast and tissue is removed.

Typically, scars are concealed by the body's natural contours, though some scars may still be visible. Recovery for this procedure is typically between four and six weeks.

### ***THIGH & BUTTOCK LIFT***

These two procedures are commonly performed at the same time as an abdominoplasty. The benefit is that the surgeon can use one continuous scar to achieve all three results (sometimes called a "lower body lift."). When performed at the same time – under general anesthesia, of course – these procedures can take several hours. Though it's a long series of procedures, most patients agree that doing all three at once is preferable to multiple surgeries.

During the thigh lift, an incision may be made from the groin, down the leg, around the back of the thigh. Sometimes this incision is extended from the groin to the hip. Special compression clothing is typically worn for several weeks following the procedures.

### ***CUSTOM & COMBINATION PROCEDURES***

Every patient's body is different. Perhaps you have an area in need of treatment that hasn't been mentioned above. Skin on the back and upper chest can also be surgically improved. At Southwest General Hospital, your board certified plastic surgeon will work with you to achieve the results *you* deserve. Keep in mind, many patients combine multiple procedures in order to save money and reduce time away from work. However, combination procedures aren't for everyone. Talk to your surgeon for more information.

### ***Does insurance cover these procedures?***

Insurance policies and coverage can vary widely from patient to patient – even when two patients have the exact same provider and plan. Generally speaking, in order to have your procedure covered by insurance, you need documentation of severe symptoms caused by excess skin *and* evidence that your symptoms have not responded to less invasive treatment options.

For example, in order to have a tummy tuck covered by insurance, you would have to document a severe rash (symptom) that has not responded to a less invasive treatment option (a topical cream, perhaps). Photo-documentation is almost always a part of this evidence-reliant process.

Having sufficient proof is usually a solid starting point for beginning the conversation with your insurance company.

Other procedures, such as breast reductions, must meet very specific requirements to be eligible for coverage. With a breast reduction, a certain amount of tissue must be removed in order to receive coverage. Otherwise, the procedure is considered “cosmetic” and not eligible for coverage. Your surgeon can provide you with more information about coverage.

### *How can I finance body contouring?*

Because getting insurance coverage can be challenging, you might like to know about your financing options. There are several approaches to financing body contouring. Some people prefer to save in advance; others take out a loan or agree to a payment plan. If your employer offers a medical expense FSA (flexible spending account), or if you have an HSA (health savings account), then you might consider taking advantage of these pre-tax dollars.

### *Other questions or concerns?*

You’ve already gone through the hardest part of weight loss. Why not finish the journey to a whole new you? Call **1-877-215-WELL** today to schedule your initial consultation with a plastic surgeon.