

LIVING & *Health*

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Plastic surgery takes up where major weight loss leaves off

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Human skin can stretch and contract, but it's no rubber band.

That's why the boom in weight-loss surgery has created an echo in the field of plastic surgery, where surgeons are increasingly trimming and tightening the loose skin that often follows massive weight loss.

"I tell (patients) to imagine, 'What would you do with the clothes in your wardrobe if you couldn't throw them away? You'd have to take them up and alter them,'" said Nashville plastic surgeon Dr. Philip Fleming.

Directors of local weight-loss surgery practices estimate that about 25%-30% of their patients will also have plastic sur-

gery. Nationally, the American Association of Bariatric Surgeons estimates that more than 100,000 people will undergo weight-loss surgery this year.



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The most popular surgery to remove excess skin is the abdominal panniculectomy, in which surgeons remove loose, overhanging abdominal skin. It's sometimes covered by insurance because the overhanging skin makes hygiene difficult and leads to problems such as rashes, Fleming says. When it's not covered by insurance, it costs patients about \$7,000.

In November, 38-year-old Vicki Meadows of Gallatin had what's commonly called a tummy tuck to remove excess skin and tighten abdominal muscles. The 5-foot-8-inch graphic designer went from 291 pounds to 160 pounds after bariatric surgery two years ago.

"Even though I had lost so much weight, all that extra skin still made it look like I had a big belly," she said.

Hospitalized for one night following the plastic surgery, Meadows returned to work two weeks later. One scar runs from one hip to the other and another runs from her breastbone to her pubic area. She said the scars have faded and wouldn't keep her from wearing a bikini.

"Two years ago I couldn't even find a bikini," she said.

Fleming said surgery to tighten the flabby skin under the arms is also popular. Facelifts, breast lifts, inner thigh and buttock lifts also are done after weight loss. And more surgeons are refining their techniques to take the whole patient into account rather than just fixing an individual area.

"We have to look artistically at the proportions of the sculpture that we're looking at," said Dr. Ted Lockwood, an Overland Park, Kansas, aesthetic plastic surgeon who took part in a panel discussion on the topic last month at the annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetic and Plastic Surgery in Boston. "And it all has to fit - whether you're looking at it from the back or the front or the side." ~