

Tummy Tuck (Abdominoplasty)

General procedure information

Abdominoplasty, or “tummy tuck surgery” as it is more commonly known, is a major surgical procedure that removes excess skin and fat from the middle and lower abdomen and tightens the muscles of the abdominal wall. It can dramatically reduce the appearance of a protruding abdomen; however it is important to remember that the surgery produces a permanent scar which, depending on the extent of the procedure, can extend from hip to hip.

Thinking it through

The best candidates for abdominoplasty are men and women who are in relatively good shape but who are bothered by a large fat deposit or loose abdominal skin that has not responded to diet or exercise.

- The procedure is also helpful in situations where multiple pregnancies have stretched a woman's abdominal muscles and skin beyond the point where they can return to normal.
- In addition, the surgery can improve the loss of skin elasticity that often occurs in older patients with slight obesity.

There are a number of situations where abdominoplasty may not be appropriate.

- If you intend to lose a substantial amount of weight, you should postpone the surgery until after you have done so.
- You should also postpone surgery if you plan future pregnancies as the vertical muscles in the abdomen are tightened during surgery and can separate again during pregnancy.
- If you have scarring from previous abdominal surgery, your surgeon may recommend against abdominoplasty or caution you that your scars from the procedure could be unusually prominent.

Finally, you need to be aware that while abdominoplasty can enhance your appearance and make you feel more self-confident, it will not necessarily change your contours to match your ideal, nor will it change your life. Before you decide on surgery, it's important to think carefully about your expectations and discuss them with your surgeon.

Evaluating risks and complications

All surgery carries some risks and there are specific complications associated with this procedure. Your surgeon will discuss them carefully with you during your consultation.

He will also explain that you can reduce your risk of complications by carefully following his instructions.

- If you smoke, for example, he will advise you to cut down, and ideally stop, as smoking may delay healing and increase the risk of complications.
- Your surgeon will also give you detailed instructions on how to prepare for your surgery and advise you when and how you should resume physical activity after your procedure.

Planning for surgery

At your initial consultation, your surgeon will evaluate your general health, determine the extent of the fat deposits in your abdominal region and carefully assess your skin tone. It is very important that you tell your surgeon if you smoke and discuss any medications, vitamins and other drugs you may be taking.

There are a number of different approaches to abdominoplasty. Based on what he learns during your consultation, your surgeon will recommend the procedure he feels will be best for you and come closest to producing the results you desire.

- For example, if you have fat deposits only in the area below your navel, you may be able to achieve good results with a less complex procedure called a mini-abdominoplasty or mini-tuck.
- Alternatively, you may benefit more from a mini or full abdominoplasty performed in conjunction with liposuction.

Understanding your procedure

A full abdominoplasty usually takes two to five hours, depending on the extent of the work required. Mini-abdominoplasty takes about an hour or two.

Most commonly, the surgeon makes a long incision from hipbone to hipbone, just above the pubic area, and a second incision to free the navel from surrounding tissue. With mini-abdominoplasty, the incision is shorter and the navel may not be moved, although it may be pulled into an unnatural shape as the skin is tightened and stitched.

Next, the surgeon separates the skin from the abdominal wall up to the ribs and lifts this large skin flap to reveal the vertical muscles of your abdomen. He then tightens these muscles by pulling them closer together and stitching them into their new position. This creates a firmer abdominal wall and a narrower waistline.

The skin flap is then stretched down and the extra skin removed. A new hole is cut for your navel, which is then stitched into place. The remaining incisions are then stitched, dressings are applied and, in some cases, a temporary tube is inserted to drain excess fluid from the site.

During a mini-abdominoplasty the skin is separated only between the incision line and the navel. This skin flap is then stretched down, the excess is removed, and the flap is stitched into place.

Recovering from surgery

Depending on the extent of your surgery, you may be allowed to go home within a few hours or you may remain in hospital for two to three days.

For the first few days after your surgery, your abdomen will probably be swollen and you will likely feel some pain. This can be controlled by medication.

- Although you may not be able to stand straight at first, you should start walking as soon as possible.
- Your surgeon will give you instructions for showering and changing your dressings.
- Your surface stitches will be removed in five to seven days, and the deeper sutures, with ends that protrude through the skin, will come out in two or three weeks.
- The dressing on your incision may be replaced by a support garment.

Getting back to normal

Some people return to work about two weeks after their surgery; others take three or four weeks to rest and recuperate. However, it may be weeks or months before you truly feel like your old self again. If you were in top physical condition, with strong abdominal muscles before your surgery, your recovery will be much faster.

- Exercise will help you heal better and even people who have never exercised before should begin an exercise program to reduce swelling, tone muscles and lower the chance of blood clots.
- Vigorous exercise, though, must be avoided until you can do it comfortably.

Your scars may actually appear to worsen as they heal during the first three to six months after your surgery. This is entirely normal.

- You should expect it to take nine months to a year for your scars to flatten out and lighten in colour.
- However, while your scars will never disappear completely, they will not show under most clothing, even bathing suits.