

Cosmetic surgery - liposuction

Liposuction is a form of cosmetic surgery in which deposits of fat are removed to reshape or reduce one or more areas of the body. Common areas targeted include thighs, buttocks, abdomen, arms, neck and under the chin.

Liposuction is not a substitute for weight reduction or a cure for obesity. Having liposuction will not help prevent cardiovascular disease or improve your general health and wellbeing. Another name for this procedure is suction assisted lipectomy.

Liposuction can be used to remove 'pockets of fat'

Body image concerns are the main reason people consider liposuction. Some people of normal weight have localised pockets of fat that don't respond to diet or exercise. Common sites include the abdomen, hips, thighs, buttocks, upper arm, neck and beneath the chin.

You need to be fit and healthy

Liposuction is best suited to normal weight people with firm, elastic skin who have pockets of fat in certain areas. To be suitable for liposuction you must be physically healthy, psychologically stable and have realistic expectations. Although age is not a significant concern, older people may have less skin elasticity and may not achieve the same results as a younger person with tighter skin.

Things to consider

Before you opt for liposuction, there are some important issues to keep in mind:

- Choose an appropriately qualified surgeon. Ask them about their training and experience in performing the procedure.
- Inform yourself fully of the possible risks, side effects and complications of the procedure.
- Think carefully about your expectations. Liposuction may improve your appearance and self-confidence, but it won't necessarily deliver your 'ideal' body image or change your life.
- Liposuction is not a substitute for weight reduction or a cure for obesity. Having liposuction will not help prevent cardiovascular disease or improve your general health and wellbeing.
- Think about the impact on your financial situation, as cosmetic surgery does not usually qualify for rebates from Medicare or private health insurance companies.
- You should have a 'cooling off' period after attending your first consultation. This will give you time to think about your decisions.

Don't be shy about asking questions and discussing your concerns with your plastic surgeon. Make sure you get a full explanation of the anticipated results and what you can expect after the procedure. If you are unsure, seek a second opinion before going ahead.

Medical issues

Before the operation, you need to discuss a range of medical issues with your doctor or surgeon including:

- **Medical history** – since some pre-existing conditions may influence decisions on surgery and anaesthesia
- **Possible risks and complications** – liposuction carries greater risk for people with medical problems such as diabetes, significant heart or lung disease, poor blood circulation or those who have recently had surgery near the area to be treated
- **Any medications you take on a regular basis** – including over-the-counter preparations and vitamin supplements
- **Any previous bad reactions** – or side effects from any drugs.

The procedure

Various types of anaesthesia can be used for liposuction. If only a small amount of fat and a limited number of body sites are involved, liposuction can be performed under local anaesthesia, which numbs only the affected areas. Some people prefer general anaesthesia, particularly if a large volume of fat is being removed.

Generally:

- A tiny incision (cut) is made and a cannula (narrow tube) is inserted.
- The cannula is pushed and pulled through the fat layer to break up the fat cells, which are then vacuumed out. The suction action is provided by a vacuum pump or large syringe.
- The person is given intravenous fluids (directly into the vein) during and immediately after surgery to replace the fluids lost when the fat is removed.
- Depending on the number of areas receiving treatment, the procedure can take up to two hours.

Specific liposuction techniques include:

- **Ultrasound-assisted** – an ultrasound device is used to melt the pockets of fat to make them easier to remove.
- **Tumescent** – fluids containing a local anaesthetic are injected into the fat pockets.
- **Super-wet** – the surgeon injects approximately the same quantity of water as there is fat to be removed.
- **Fluid injection** – a combination of local anaesthetic, epinephrine and saline solution is injected into the fat pocket. Epinephrine helps to constrict blood vessels and limit blood loss and bruising.

Immediately after the operation

After the operation, you may expect:

- Bruising and swelling
- Possible numbness and minor pain
- Antibiotics to prevent infection
- Insertion of a small drainage tube – this may be inserted beneath the skin for a couple of days to prevent fluid build-up
- To start walking around as soon as possible – your doctor may advise this to reduce swelling and help prevent blood clots from forming in your legs
- A pressure garment – this may need to be worn over the treated area to control swelling and help the skin adjust to the new underlying shape.

Possible complications

All surgery carries some degree of risk. The risks of liposuction increase if a large number of body areas are treated at the same time or if the areas operated on are large in size. Some of the possible complications of liposuction may include:

- In ultrasound-assisted liposuction – injury to the skin or deeper tissues due to the heat from the ultrasound device that is used to liquefy fat cells
- In the tumescent and super-wet techniques – complications caused by the injection of anaesthetic fluid can include lignocaine toxicity (if the solution's lignocaine content is too high) or collection of fluid in the lungs (if too much fluid is given)
- Excessive fluid loss, which can lead to shock
- Fluid accumulation
- Infection – this is a serious complication, as infections that develop in fatty tissues are difficult to treat
- Delayed healing
- Friction burns or other damage to the skin or nerves
- Irregular skin surface
- Asymmetric or 'baggy' skin surface
- Numbness
- Skin pigmentation changes
- Perforation injury to the vital organs
- Allergic drug reactions
- Formation of blood clots or fat clots, which may migrate to the lungs and cause death.

Taking care of yourself at home

Be guided by your doctor but general self-care suggestions include:

- Strenuous activity should be avoided for about one month as the body continues to heal.
- You need to see your doctor one week to 10 days after surgery to have your stitches removed.
- You may need to continue wearing your pressure garment for several weeks.
- Any bleeding, unusual symptoms or severe pain should be reported to your doctor.

Long-term outlook

Liposuction is not a substitute for good diet and regular exercise. Unhealthy lifestyle choices (such as eating a diet high in fats and neglecting to exercise) will result in unwanted weight gain. Suction lipectomy is suitable for people who have bulges which persist after diet and exercise. It is not a substitute for weight loss.

Usually the 'extra' skin will contract (tighten) after liposuction; however, in some cases, a procedure to remove excess skin may also be needed. If your skin is dimpled before the liposuction, it will probably still be dimpled afterwards as well.

Finding a surgeon

Liposuction is not a medical specialty and no specialised training is currently required. In fact, it can be performed by any registered doctor (GP). It is also performed by plastic surgeons and dermatologists. You should ask your doctor about their training and experience – it is preferable to have this procedure done by a reputable professional who is specially trained to perform liposuction and has a lot of experience in performing these procedures.

You may want to ask your local GP for advice on a suitable and reputable doctor or hospital where liposuction is performed.

Other forms of treatment

Alternatives to liposuction can include:

- Eating a healthier, low fat diet
- Exercise
- Massage
- Accepting yourself as you are.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Plastic surgeon
- The Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons Information Hotline Tel. 1300 367 446.

Things to remember

- Liposuction is a form of cosmetic surgery in which localised deposits of fat are removed to reshape or reduce one or more areas of the body.
- Liposuction is most likely to be successful for healthy weight people with firm, elastic skin who have pockets of excess fat in certain areas.
- Liposuction is not a substitute for good diet and regular exercise.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons

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