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resources

Dr. Kevin Ciresi SAN RAMON 925.275.1685 WWW.DRCIRESI.COM

Dr. Robert Gray MD SPA PLEASANTON 925.846.2772
WWW.GRAYSURGERY.COM OR WWW.MDLASERSPA.COM

Dr. Stephen Ronan BLACKHAWK PLASTIC SURGERY CENTER DANVILLE 925.736.5757
WWW.BLACKHAWKPLASTICSURGERY.COM

Dr. Tina Smith KAISER PERMANENTE WALNUT CREEK 925.295.5885

Face and Body Transformations

IS COSMETIC SURGERY RIGHT FOR YOU?

BY LISA HOTCHKISS

"Are they real, or are they fake?"

"She looks so refreshed – bet she had an eye job."

"Wow! Have you been working out?"

In these reality-TV days of "The Swan" and "Extreme Makeover," the question of who had what done to which part is much more prevalent. While some may squirm when they see an actual facelift being performed, many others conclude the temporary pain is worth the result. In 2004, \$7.7 billion was spent on elective cosmetic surgery in the United States, a 17 percent increase from the previous year. Baby boomers with discretionary income are starting to notice the evil tricks gravity can play on one's face and anatomy and are opting for cosmetic surgery.

Call it vanity or a self-esteem boost, but ask the majority of cosmetic surgery recipients why they decided to alter their appearance, and they'll say, "I did it for me." That's exactly my answer when my button-nosed friends ask why I had my very Italian nose de-Romanized many moons ago. "But your nose gave you so much character! Why did you change it?" Sometimes a little less character can make one feel much more confident about one's profile.



A BEAUTIFUL RETREAT FOR A RESTFUL RECOVERY

Tucked in the wooded seclusion of a Lafayette neighborhood, Lori Carson's Julia Morgan-style home welcomes the bandaged and bruised for a bit of respite. The clientele are recent female cosmetic surgery patients needing a private retreat following their various surgeries and the standard 24-hour hospital recovery-room time.

A registered nurse with a specialty in laser surgeries, Carson first heard about a plastic surgery recovery facility in Palo Alto and latched on to the idea. Once her four children were grown and gone, Carson decided to convert her lovely five-bedroom abode into a "bed and breakfast with an RN" to give plastic surgery patients a place to recover for a bit before heading back to real life. Clients can stay a minimum of two days and as long as they need.

Plastic Surgery Recovery House

LORINDA CARSON, RN

LAFAYETTE

925.385.1776 OR 925.787.6858

WWW.PLASTICSURGERYRECOVERYHOUSE.COM

Self esteem is the primary reason cited for elective cosmetic surgery, and it's really the best reason. Dr. Kevin Ciresi, a plastic surgeon in San Ramon, notes, "Many of my patients are beautiful when they walk in to my office. But they feel like they want to be better."

Motivation is important, but prospective patients also need to have realistic expectations. "Someone may come in and say, 'I want to look like Britney Spears,' and I have to gently tell them that may not be possible," Ciresi says. With digital imaging, patients can get a sense of what they'll look like when the bandages come off. Some surgeons caution, however, that even though the computer can give you a Jennifer Aniston nose, the surgeon may not be able to because of the structure of your face.

Of course, self-esteem is not the only reason for seeking plastic surgery. In many cases, such surgery is deemed "medically necessary." Dr. Tina Smith, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon at Kaiser Permanente in Walnut Creek, explains: "People with droopy eyelids may actually suffer obstructed vision as a result. In those cases, an eyelift procedure would not only be aesthetically pleasing, it also would provide a medical benefit."

As an undergraduate, Smith faced the decision of studying art or medicine. As a plastic surgeon, she uses her artistic talents to help her patients. "I take a potential disaster and use it as an opportunity to have a significant impact on my patient's life," she says. Like many surgeons, Smith donates her services to organizations that provide free plastic and reconstructive surgery to needy children and adults in third-world countries.

According to Smith, every reconstructive case has an aesthetic goal. "I have performed many breast reconstructions for women who have undergone mastectomies," she notes. "This can be incredibly important in helping to restore a woman's sense of self after a life-altering illness."

Women make up 90 percent of the cosmetic surgery patient roster, but more men are choosing to have their foreheads lifted and those love handles liposuctioned away. The top five procedures in 2004 included: liposuction, breast augmentation, eyelid surgery, nose alterations and facelifts. Tummy tucks are also high on the list for women, as are hair transplants for men.

Choosing a plastic surgeon is often a result of word-of-mouth referral. But if you're not sure your tennis partner will admit to having had eyelid surgery during her three-week "vacation" last winter, do some research. Several Web sites are available to provide a list of board-certified plastic surgeons, as well as a wealth of information about the actual procedures and "before and after pictures." Two comprehensive sites are the American Society of Plastic Surgeons' Web site, www.plasticsurgery.org, and www.enhance.com, an informational site for elective health care needs.

MOST POPULAR COSMETIC PLASTIC SURGERY PROCEDURES

PROCEDURE	DURATION OF RESULTS	RECOVERY	COST ESTIMATE
Liposuction (Suction-assisted Lipectomy) Improve body shape by removing exercise-resistant fat deposits with a tube and vacuum device. Common locations include chin, cheeks, neck, upper arms, above breasts, abdomen, buttocks, hips, thighs, knees, calves and ankles.	Permanent, with sensible diet and exercise.	Back to work: 1-2 weeks. Full recovery from swelling and bruising: 1-6 months.	\$2,750-6,500, depending on extent of surgery
Breast Augmentation (Augmentation Mammoplasty) Enhance the size of breasts using inflatable implants filled with saline.	Variable. Implants may require removal or replacement.	Back to work: A few days. Physical contact with breasts: 3-4 weeks. Fading of scars: several months to a year or more.	\$6,700-7,500
Eyelid Surgery (Blepharoplasty) Correct drooping upper eyelids and puffy bags below the eyes by removing excess fat, skin and muscle.	Several years. Sometimes permanent.	Reading: 2-3 days. Back to work: 7-10 days.	\$8,250
Nose Surgery (Rhinoplasty) Reshape nose by reducing or increasing size, removing hump, changing shape of tip or bridge, narrowing span of nostrils, or changing angle between nose and upper lip.	Permanent.	Back to work: A few days. Bruising subsides after 7-10 days.	\$5,900
Facelift (Rhytidectomy) Improve sagging facial skin, jowls and loose neck skin by removing excess fat, tightening muscles, re-draping skin. Most often done on men and women over 40.	Usually 5-10 years.	Back to work: 10-14 days. Must limit exposure to sun for several months.	\$13,000
Tummy Tuck (Abdominoplasty) Flatten abdomen by removing excess fat and skin and tightening muscles of abdominal wall.	Dependent on diet and exercise following surgery.	Back to work: 2-4 weeks. Fading and flattening of scars: 3 months to 2 years.	\$8,200

NOTE: This chart is based on information from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. Please consult your own physician regarding the potential risks and side effects of various cosmetic surgery procedures.

Once you've narrowed the list of surgeons, schedule a consultation to make sure you feel comfortable with the person who may be dramatically altering your appearance. Look at the doctor's portfolio of "before and after" photos. Talk to former patients to see what their experiences were really like. Be sure to ask the physician about all potential risks and side effects.

After a consultation, patients often change their minds about what they think they want, says Dr. Stephen Ronan, a plastic surgeon at the Blackhawk Plastic Surgery Center. "I listen to what result they're looking for and try to come up with the least expensive and least risky alternative for them," he explains. "They may come in thinking they need surgery for lines or spots on their faces, when actually I can just put together a skin treatment instead."

One patient in her late twenties was sure she needed a brow lift, but Ronan suggested a different brow shape instead, and the patient was thrilled with the result.

And now one can also choose the type of setting for cosmetic surgery procedures. Laser technology and non-surgical procedures such as Botox injections have prompted the rapid appearance of medical spas in many neighborhoods. Dr. Robert Gray recently opened MD Spa in Pleasanton, offering clients a one-stop shop for all things relaxing and facially rejuvenating.

"We combine a plastic surgeon's services with a luxurious spa setting, and we actually have an operating room on-site," Gray says. "This way we're able to offer our clients both surgical and non-surgical approaches to facial enhancements." Prior to getting a nip or tuck, one can get a massage or just enjoy the soft music and candles in the waiting room.

Cosmetic surgery is no longer a privilege limited to the rich and famous. Need an image boost? All you need is a little courage, a decent limit on your credit card and the realization that a new nose or tummy tuck won't solve all your problems. It just might help make them more bearable, though. ☺