

## **Abdominoplasty: A Patient's Journey**

I've always been one of those people that gains weight very easily. It's something I've struggled with ever since I was little, and after having children things just got worse and worse. I was working full time, had two young children to look after, and I simply didn't have the time or energy to go to the gym. To make matters worse, my stomach muscles split during pregnancy, leaving me with a saggy paunch that no amount of exercise could shift.

Over the years the weight just piled on, causing me to develop a sort of 'fatty apron'. I felt extremely depressed about my appearance and would always wear baggy tops to cover up my belly. But it wasn't until my 50s that I really considered doing anything about it. Both my daughters – now in their 30s – decided to undergo combined tummy tuck and breast reduction procedures. I nursed both of them through it, so had a good idea of what the operation involved. I also saw just how fantastic the results were – I had never realised just what a difference surgery could make.

Seeing how pleased my daughters were, I decided that I too would have an abdominoplasty with the same surgeon – and that happened to be Lisa. She was brilliant right from the start. In the two consultations before the operation she took the time to explain everything, showing before and after photos and describing the procedure in detail. She also referred me to a psychologist who ran through all the potential risks and complications. That was slightly frightening, but it is something you need to know. It's all part of the care Lisa and her team offer you. After all, a tummy tuck is a major operation and they need to be sure you are absolutely certain it's the right option for you.

On the day of the procedure I was in hospital by 6.30am and was taken straight to my own en-suite room. Soon afterwards Lisa came to see how I was feeling, and she was shortly followed by the anaesthetist who checked I was fit and healthy. When all the necessary tests had been done and everything was ready a nurse walked me down to theatre. I wasn't at all nervous, although that probably had something to do with my daughters; I'd seen how great the outcome could be, and I was really, really excited to think I could achieve the same look.

I led down on the operating table and the anaesthetist warned me I would feel a sharp scratch. I felt a warm sensation spread across my body, and before I knew it I was asleep. The next thing I remember was waking up in the recovery room. I had been placed on my side with my legs bent, making a U shape. It was like being in a cocoon and, to be perfectly honest, I felt completely euphoric. I didn't want to move, so I was actually quite pleased when the nurses told me I had to stay in the same position for another 24 hours. A catheter had been inserted, so I wouldn't need to get up to go to the toilet.

I remained in hospital for two nights, during which time the care was exceptional. I saw Lisa every day, and the nurses were on hand to help with anything I needed, from getting to the shower to providing me with food (although I must say that my appetite, like my stomach, had shrunk considerably!) Lisa doesn't use any drains, which I was very grateful for. I did have to wear compression socks which aren't particularly attractive, and the tape around the scar was a little uncomfortable, but I wasn't in any pain whatsoever.

After I'd been in hospital a couple of days Lisa decided I was ready to go home. She prescribed a course of painkillers and gave me a 24 hour number to call should I have any worries. She also left me with very strict instructions to follow when I got home. I had to place pillows behind me and under my knees, thereby maintaining a U shape. I even had to sleep in this position, although that wasn't difficult as the tablets did make me quite drowsy.

My husband also had to help me get in and out of bed for the first four days, as my stomach muscles were temporarily rendered useless. You don't realise how much you use them until you have abdominal surgery. I did have a little set-back as one of my stitches started leaking, but Lisa sent me dressings through the post and reassured me that I could return to the hospital if I was concerned. However, the problem soon resolved itself, and gradually the discomfort abated. After 10 days I had the stitches removed, and within six weeks I was completely recovered.

It's now been three years since I had my operation and I'm so pleased I had it done. It sounds extreme, but it has changed my life. It's just such a joy going to the shops and buying pretty underwear rather than those giant belly-hugging devices! The scar is barely visible, and is only a very thin, white line. The results are truly incredible. Last year I even wore a bikini for the first time in my life, and that's something I never thought I'd do. My physical health has also improved dramatically. Ever since having children my stomach muscles were extremely weak, meaning my back was working twice as hard. As a result I suffered from back ache, but that has completely disappeared now – something which is very useful when it comes to the gardening!

The only thing that I must say is that, as Lisa told me before the procedure, you cannot rush the recovery period. It's a serious operation and you need to take it easy afterwards. But so long as you appreciate this fact, you should not be put off by surgery. And if you've got a good surgeon behind you, then you know you're safe. I cannot express how reassured I felt having Lisa and her team by my side. Just knowing that I could call the Lisa, the hospital or the psychologist at any time was the greatest back-up, and it made my entire experience easy, stress-free and, as odd as it may seem, really quite enjoyable.