

healthy living

# Functional Plastic Surgery?

An Unexpected Truth

BY CAROLYN CHANG, M.D., F.A.C.S.



Can plastic surgery improve your quality of life? It certainly can, but not necessarily in the way you are thinking. Believe it or not, many plastic surgery procedures result in significant functional improvements to the body, not just the commonly thought-of cosmetic enhancements. Many women suffer from physical limitations as a result of gravity, aging, and childbirth that can interfere with their quality of life. Their bodies are less centered and stable, making it difficult for them to engage in their favorite activities.

Over the last decade, I have seen an increasing number of patients request plastic surgery to solve physical challenges, most commonly due to abdominal instability and large breasts after childbirth. These women represent a departure from the typical plastic surgery patient, who desires primarily to enhance her appearance, in that they are also seeking functional improvement and pain relief so they may better enjoy the activities they love.

## Feeling Good to the Core Again

Enter my patient Jennifer, a Bay Area mom and advanced yoga aficionado. She takes care of herself, meditates, eats a thoughtful organic diet, and is generally physically fit. But after her last pregnancy, she has been unable to achieve the same core stability and strength she once had. Yoga's gravity-defying poses require this stability and strength, coupled with a supple body. Reaching her full asana (posture) potential has simply not been possible due to physical limitations.

According to Jennifer: "I had my child later in life and retained a lot of water weight; I appeared to be carrying twins. After I delivered, my abdomen felt unstable and wobbly. It wasn't just extra skin, but also the muscle structure was weakened. No matter how much exercise

I did, I was unable to lose the feeling that my guts were seeping out."

What Jennifer was experiencing is abdominal laxity resulting from the overstretching that occurs during pregnancy. The abdominal wall must adapt to accommodate the growing baby. As a result, the tissues enveloping the abdominal wall musculature stretch, resulting in a separation of the normally centrally located muscles. This separation is responsible for the persistent bulging of the abdomen that can be experienced postpartum. Abdominal exercises can help by strengthening the muscles but will not work to tighten the overstretched tissues.

Many women with extreme abdominal laxity feel an instability and weakness in their core, and some may experience lower back pain due to an exaggerated swaying in the area. None of this is good news during exercise, as it can result in a woman's constant feeling of her "insides falling out," especially when core strength is a must.

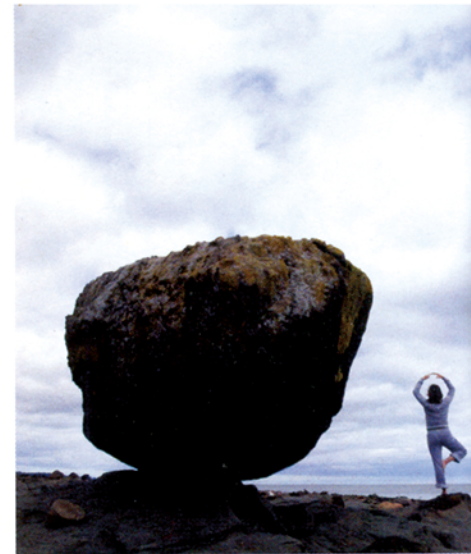
For those for whom conservative measures such as diet and exercise fail to correct the problem, an abdominoplasty (tummy tuck) is a solution. Designed to eliminate the bulging, this procedure tightens the entire abdominal wall and removes any excess abdominal skin and fat. The result is a toned, supported, and tightened abdomen and a straightened lower back. Patients report that they feel "zipped up" again. The procedure results in unmistakable functional relief while also providing a bonus aesthetic benefit.

## Breast Reduction and Lift — Relief at Last

Another common area of concern before and after pregnancy is having large, pendulous breasts as a result of weight gain and breast feeding. Large, droopy breasts can be cumbersome, and the feeling that they get in the way is inevitable. Finding appropriate bras to control them adequately is often impossible. Back pain and shoulder discomfort can also be an issue. For women with this condition, unfortunately, diet and exercise can be ineffective.

A breast reduction can provide great relief to women seeking a weight decrease and lift. A mastopexy (breast lift) can provide control for those who need just a tightening. The result is a more manageable size and a compact and lifted breast shape. Better balance and more mobility and freedom are the noticeable benefits.

According to Sharon, another yoga devotee, "Though many women seek to enlarge their breasts, mine — already naturally large — were a burden that put a lot of extra weight on my back. Also, I have always loved to exercise,



and I found that certain yoga postures and the sitting meditation and deep breathing that I enjoy were compromised due to the stress of carrying my large chest."

## Plastic Surgery — Not Just for Looks Anymore

Plastic surgery has most commonly been thought of as only for those seeking an improvement in appearance. And certainly, this is the most important goal for many procedures. Yet it is a misconception that plastic surgery serves no other purpose than cosmetic enhancement.

For Jennifer, our yoga mom, the benefits have been unmistakable. Just a few weeks after her surgery, she has noticed a more supported midsection, and that old familiar feeling of stability had returned. She is happy to be tuning into her own body again and is grateful that she discovered what she needed to feel supported internally and externally. Naturally, she is excited to resume her yoga routine to strengthen her new core. And while having a child has interrupted her sitting meditation, she hopes that the internal support she now feels will extend outward to her moving meditation and help her achieve greater balance and peace. 🍃

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