

(Parkland Life Column for January 2007)

Opening up Your “Windows to the soul”

By David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS

It's said that eyes are the “windows to the soul”. But sometimes, the view is significantly obscured by full, drooping eyelids or brows. Patients say they feel young and energetic on the inside, but all people see on the outside is a tired, stressed, worn-out expression.

Several kinds of invasive and non-invasive procedures can help change that.

For patients with excess, sagging skin above the upper eyelid fold, or sagging “bags” of fatty tissue beneath the eye, cosmetic eyelid surgery can restore a more youthful, alert look.

Let's start with the upper eyelids where lids that have become excessively full can often make the patient appear to be squinting. The surgical solution is to remove excess skin and fatty tissue. Incisions are made along the eyelid folds. The surgeon then removes fat and skin and closes the incisions with tiny sutures.

To remedy under-eye “bags”, incisions are placed immediately below the eyelashes where they are inconspicuous or inside the lower eyelids, depending upon the specific patient. Fatty tissue which had caused a puffy look is removed and the incisions are closed. Resurfacing with a chemical peel or laser is sometimes used on the skin of the lower eyelid to help minimize fine lines and wrinkles, and to shrink excess skin. Often, Botox and/or fillers are also used to address crow's feet and enhance the overall results of the eyelid surgery.

The goal in eyelid surgery is to produce the most significant improvement possible within the bounds of utmost safety. Removing too much skin and fat can create a skeletal look later on and in rare cases, can make it difficult to close the eyes properly.

In some cases, puffy upper eyelids have occurred because the eyebrow has slipped below the orbital bone. A browlift is sometimes done instead of upper eyelid surgery. In other cases, a browlift is combined with eyelid surgery.

For a browlift, the surgeon typically makes three tiny incisions in the patient's scalp and two incisions in the hair in the temple regions. Due to the careful placement and small size of these incisions, there is almost no hair loss. The surgeon inserts an endoscope through the tiny incisions and uses it to lift and reposition the skin and tissue upward to provide the necessary lift to increase the distance between the brow and eyelashes. The brows are positioned to achieve the maximum improvement without creating an overly startled or unnatural look.

The vast majority of patients report that discomfort is minimal with these out-patient eyelid and browlift surgeries and recovery is fairly rapid. There is some bruising and swelling for the first week or so, but after 7-10 days, most patients return to work and social activities, though strenuous activity should be avoided for 3-4 weeks. Sun exposure must be avoided.

For patients who don't want or need surgery but do want to see some improvement in the eye areas, several non-invasive treatments can be very effective.

For "crow's feet", Botox can be used to relax muscles which constantly contract when you smile or frown, thus reinforcing the wrinkles. Restylane, Radiesse or other fillers can be used to fill in persistent wrinkles. Neither Botox nor fillers are permanent solutions and must be repeated after a number of months. When the wrinkles are particularly stubborn or if a more lasting result is desired, peels and lasers can be used. In rare cases, tiny muscles are cut to permanently relax the affected area.

For dark circles under the eyes, topical bleaching crèmes can sometimes minimize them sufficiently, but repeated treatments are needed to produce noticeable results. If crèmes don't do the job, vascular or pigment lasers can produce good results but again, multiple treatments are usually required.

Every patient's situation is different in terms of goals, skin quality and medical history. That's why a consultation with a board-certified plastic surgeon is the best way to begin the decision-making process about any invasive or non-invasive cosmetic procedure. Many plastic surgeons in South Florida offer free initial consultations.

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