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Choosing a Plastic Surgeon: A Checklist

By David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS

Most people would never consider having a medically-required surgical procedure without carefully checking the credentials of the surgeon and the accreditation of the facility where surgery will be performed.

The same should hold true for cosmetic surgery, for though these procedures are elective and seldom related to serious medical issues, they are still surgery and entail risks, albeit far less than disease-related procedures.

Where do you start? Here are some guidelines:

- Ask specifically if the doctor is certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery (ABPS). Though there are a variety of physician accreditation entities, this is the only board recognized by the American Board of Medical Specialties to certify doctors in the specialty of plastic surgery. If you are not comfortable asking the doctor, you can check certification at www.abms.org.

- Ask if the doctor is a member of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. This organization requires members to be ABPS certified but also have special cosmetic surgery experience and participate in continuing education. Only a quarter of all ABPS-certified surgeons have been accepted into membership by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Check online at www.surgery.org.

- Ask about the doctor's hospital privileges to perform the surgery you are considering—even if you are planning to have it done as an out-patient. Hospitals evaluate a physician's training and competency before granting privileges. The professional staff at the hospital can verify privileges.

- If your procedure will be done in a non-hospital surgical facility, make sure it is accredited by a recognized accrediting body, or Medicare-certified, or state licensed. Some sites to check are www.jcaho.com, www.aaahc.org and www.aaaasf.org.

Once you've verified these credential issues, the next step is a personal consultation. It's always a good idea to consult with more than one surgeon, for comparison purposes. Many do not charge for an initial consultation.

During the consultation, ask how often the doctor performs the procedure you are considering. Ask to see before and after photos. In some cases, doctors will even provide names of patients who've had the surgery whom you can call for a first-person account of the procedure.

Bring your complete medical history with you to the consultation, including previous surgeries, past and current medications, allergies, family medical history and any other factors which might influence how you are likely to respond during surgery.

Ask for a complete cost breakdown, including surgeon fees, anesthesia, facility fees and any other services that might be involved. Depending on the procedure, these might include a pre-op physical and blood work, medications, surgical garments and private-duty nursing. Post-surgical care should be included in the procedure fee.

Plastic surgery is part science, part art. In a small percentage of cases, revisions are needed after the surgery to improve upon results. Ask what the doctor's pricing policy is on revisions. Some charge, some don't.

Make sure the doctor explains all possible risks associated with the procedure. In a small percentage of cases, risks common to all surgical procedures can occur, such as bleeding, infection and scar tissue formation. There are also specific risks associated with some procedures. You should not have to ask about risks; if the doctor does not bring up the topic, be concerned.

Ask what recovery from the procedure typically entails. While every patient is different, the doctor can tell you what the common post-operative time period is, what activity restrictions might apply and the level of discomfort typically experienced during recovery.

Once you are satisfied that the surgeons you are considering meet the criteria discussed here, let personal intuition play a role in your final decision.

When you have a cosmetic surgery procedure, you will spend a good amount of time with the doctor and his staff both before and after surgery. So it's extremely important that you feel a strong rapport with the surgeon, that you feel he or she has been honest and straightforward about the results you can expect, that you are comfortable asking questions and that he or she responds in a way you readily understand. The same goes for the doctor's staff who will ideally act as your cheerleaders and support system throughout the surgical and recovery periods. #

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