

(Parkland Life Column for May, 2007 issues)

Having a Baby & Keeping Your Figure, too... Reversing the Body-Changing Effects of Motherhood

By David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS

Ah, childbirth--the beautiful, life-affirming miracle that changes a woman's life in so many wonderful ways but often leaves Mommy with a bulging belly and sagging breasts.

While some women recapture their pre-pregnancy figures with seemingly little effort, for others it is simply not possible, due to physical changes which have occurred during pregnancy or later, during nursing.

For example, even the most vigorous diet and exercise program cannot fully restore original tone and shape to the abdominal area. Consistent, targeted exercise can sometimes tighten abdominal muscles if they have been stretched but not separated. But the uterine enlargement which occurs during pregnancy results in significant stretching of the tissues of the abdominal wall as well. Fascial tissues (which interconnect the muscles) do not respond to exercise. The looseness of these lower abdominal tissues creates some unavoidable bulging, even if excellent muscle tone is regained. Similarly, excess, hanging abdominal skin, which can stubbornly remain long after a woman returns to her pre-pregnancy weight, cannot be eliminated by sit-ups or any other kind of exercise.

Nursing can change both the size and the location of the breasts. Some women are left with significantly reduced volume, others with far more volume than is comfortable. Most experience downward shifts in "breast geography", which usually worsens over time.

So what to do?

The least invasive, most affordable option is the one most of our own Moms and Grandmothers chose: To view body changes as part of the price they paid for the joys of motherhood. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with that choice.

But today, there are other choices as well.

Abdominoplasty (tummy tuck) is the third most common cosmetic surgery for women. The procedure is fairly straightforward and results in extremely high patient satisfaction rates. Incisions are placed at the "bikini line", very low on the abdomen. The length of the incision depends on the degree of looseness in the skin and how much will need to be removed. An 8-10" incision is typical. Skin and fat are first lifted off the underlying musculature of the abdomen. Fascia tissue is tightened by placing multiple sutures. In essence, the underlying framework of the abdomen is reshaped.

The skin and fat are then pulled downward; excess skin and fat are removed. If a large amount of skin must be removed, it is usually necessary to make an incision around the umbilicus (belly button), leaving a barely perceptible scar inside the umbilicus. Incisions are closed with sutures placed beneath the skin.

There are various ways to restore post-nursing breasts to a more attractive size and position.

Volume loss can be addressed with implants. Incisions are placed either at the border of the areola or in the fold beneath the breast. Implants are placed behind the chest muscle or behind the breast. In either case, natural breast tissue is located in front of the implant where it can be readily examined. After implant placement and positioning, the incisions are meticulously closed to produce the most minimal scar the patient's individual healing process will allow.

If breasts have become uncomfortably large, they can be reduced and lifted by surgically reducing the size of the lower skin envelope of the breast so the breast mound can be repositioned upward. Then the nipple and areola are repositioned upward on the newly shaped breast. Incisions (usually located around the nipple, from the lower center of the areola to the fold beneath the breast, and within the fold beneath the breast) produce visible scars which improve significantly over 6-12 months.

Breasts of any size can sag after pregnancy and nursing. Like breast reduction surgery, the breast lift procedure involves removing some of the lower skin envelope to reposition the breast mound upward, and repositioning the nipple and areola upward on the newly shaped breast. If there is very little natural breast tissue, implants can be inserted. Prior to surgery, the surgeon marks the breasts while the patient is in a seated position, as a guide. Before closing, the patient is brought to a seated position so the breasts can be compared to insure maximum symmetry. Incisions are then closed with sutures beneath the skin.

It's best to delay these types of surgery until a woman feels her family is complete. When a pregnancy occurs after a tummy tuck, most of the improvements it achieved will be lost. Breast surgery can sometimes impact ability to nurse in the future.

And remember, Moms: whatever options you choose, children always think their mothers are beautiful. Happy Mother's Day. #

David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS is a Columbia University Medical School graduate, a Board-certified plastic surgeon, and former Chief of Surgery at Coral Springs Medical Center. In practice in Coral Springs since 1989, he can be reached at 954-752-1020 or www.DrLevens.com.