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Facelift: It's Still the Answer for Excess, Hanging Skin

By David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS

Nobody wants to undergo facelift surgery if a non-surgical procedure can achieve the same results.

Problem is, it can't.

Of course, that fact doesn't stop enterprising entrepreneurs from claiming they have a product or technique that can produce the results of a facelift with "No doctors. No anesthetic. No pain. No risks. No big bills." A quick trip online provides lots of options... even facelift by hypnosis.

That's not to say that all non-surgical approaches to facial rejuvenation are bogus. A long list of procedures and treatments available today offer legitimate solutions to such conditions as fine wrinkles, poor skin tone, hyperpigmentation and rough skin texture. These include peels, laser resurfacing, dermabrasion, Botox® and injectable fillers.

There are also procedures, such as thread lift and thermage, which can provide temporary "lifts" for slightly sagging skin.

But if you look in the mirror and see skin sagging beneath the jawline, under the chin and/or on the neck, and you want a solution that's going to last 7-12 years, surgery is the only real solution. The reality is that the only way to get rid of excess skin is to remove it and to tighten the underlying tissues. No matter how appealing it might sound, you just cannot do that by hypnosis...or by any other means than cosmetic surgery.

What's involved?

First, have a free consultation with one more cosmetic (plastic) surgeons to confirm that a non-invasive procedure isn't going to solve your problem. If the consensus is that you need a surgical facelift, decide if and when you'll have the time to have the procedure done. You'll need to stop smoking at least 3 weeks before and after surgery. (Nicotine causes constriction of the blood vessels that supply the skin, reducing blood flow and delaying healing.)

Recovery is generally quite rapid though actual recovery time varies. There is some tightness in the neck area immediately after a facelift. This early tightness is necessary to produce the best possible results long-term. Most of the tight feeling fades entirely during the first 2-3 weeks after surgery. Areas of numbness can last for weeks or months.

There is typically bruising and swelling for 5-10 days. Patients can return to work and social activity in 10-21 days, but must avoid aerobic or strenuous activity for 14-21

days. Aerobic activity that increases the pulse over 100 also increases blood pressure, and could increase and prolong swelling or cause bleeding if resumed too soon after surgery.

What about the procedure itself? Here's how it's done:

The surgeon makes small incisions within the hair at the temples, in the skin creases in front of and behind the ears, and within the hair behind the ears. (Location of incisions can vary). Then, the surgeon gently elevates the skin and deeper facial tissue. Next, the skin and deeper tissue are lifted very carefully in a generally backward and upward direction to reposition and retighten them in a more satisfactory location.

If neck muscles have become loose, they are tightened and repositioned to provide better support and ideal contour. In both face and neck areas, excess or malpositioned fatty tissue is either repositioned or sculpted through liposuction or direct removal. After re-draping the skin and soft tissues, excess tissue is removed and the incisions are closed with very tiny stitches to help minimize the appearance of scars.

Some tissue characteristics present special challenges which can impact the level of success which can be achieved by a facelift. These include thick, heavy, oily skin, sun damaged skin, excessive or inadequate fatty tissue, and changes in tissue resulting from previous surgical procedures. The surgeon should discuss such limitations during the initial consultation so the patient can have realistic expectations. In most cases, there are techniques that can be used to compensate for special tissue challenges. After a facelift, most patients have scars that are undetectable when covered with makeup. The quality of the scars depends on each individual's healing characteristics.

It's important to know that a facelift alone will not eliminate fine facial wrinkles, remove pigmentation or smooth the skin's surface especially around the mouth. To address these problems, smoothing techniques such as chemical peels and filling techniques such as fat injections are done in conjunction with the facelift. This will all be spelled out during your consultation with your cosmetic surgeon. Then the decision in yours—and yours alone—to make.

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