

CHICAGO PARENT

After baby is born

by Dawn Reiss

Since the beginning of time, women have wanted to look beautiful. Ancient Egyptians were known for using dark gray ore of lead to emphasize their eyes. The Greeks used ochre clays laced with red iron for lipstick. And in 1500 B.C. the Chinese and Japanese used rice powder to paint their faces white. While our standards of beauty have changed, one common theme remains the same: women want to be sexually appealing.

Modern medicine has given way to more permanent changes. Plastered on the back of magazines are advertisements for improving sexual satisfaction, cosmetic appearance and self-esteem with vaginal rejuvenation, labiaplasty (reduction and recontouring of the labia minor), vaginoplasty (vaginal tightening) and hymen repair. "Dr. 90210," a cable reality TV series on plastic surgery, has helped heighten awareness. Without a little blue pill option, more and more women are turning to plastic surgery to give Mother Nature a boost.

While some women have surgery for cosmetic reasons, others say it was a last resort to stop debilitating pelvic pain.

When Jennifer Dunbar, 34, of New Lenox, a mother of two, gave birth to her first child five years ago she suffered a fourth degree tear.

"It was as bad as it can get, top to bottom" Dunbar says. "The doctor was supposed to stitch me up, but it didn't stick well and it became a horrible wound.

"Sex was not fun and working out was horrible," Dunbar says. "I was uncomfortable all the time. I was constantly in pain and discomfort. It was sheer misery."

To make matters worse, after her second child, a 9-pound, 9-ounce girl, was born March 15, 2005, Dunbar's bladder sagged into the vagina, causing bladder prolapse that created constant leakage problems.

Then Dunbar happened upon the show "Dr. 90210." Last January, she contacted one of the show's doctors, Dr. Gary Alter, and was prepared to fly out to California until she decided to check in the Chicago area for a doctor first. That's when she found Dr. Otto Placik, who has offices in Chicago and Arlington Heights. She ultimately decided to have him do a labiaplasty Dec. 3 as an outpatient at Northwest Community Hospital in Arlington Heights.

"I finally decided that I can't go through life like this," Dunbar says.

The price tag was huge: \$3,500 out of pocket to Placik, plus \$500 for the anesthesiologist and \$1,000 in hospital fees. The surgery is typically an outpatient procedure done under local anesthesia where the excess skin of the labia is removed. Recovery time typically takes at least six weeks. Although Placik typically does 10-15 labiaplasties annually, he has had more requests this year than previously.

"The procedure has been around for a long time," Placik says. "I think more women are getting it because I think there is more awareness, which is partially media driven. Prior to the last few years, I think a lot of women were unhappy with the situation but didn't think they could do something about it."

Although the first few days after surgery were difficult, Dunbar says the pain is diminishing.

"I just feel relief, that the worse is over," Dunbar says. "Hopefully I can just move on, be happy and not think about it and get back to my relationship with my husband."

Arlington Heights' Gia LaMar, 35, wanted the same thing. She had pelvic pain and other issues before childbirth, but after she had her son in 2003 that included an episiotomy, the problem became worse.

"It affects you if you're always in pain, you don't want to do anything," LaMar says. LaMar saw three surgeons, started using hypo allergenic soaps, wearing cotton underwear and even saw a dermatologist.

"Every doctor was like you're fine, there is nothing you can do," LaMar says. "I just don't think they knew what it was. I never knew about labiaplasty until I started watching "Dr. 90210."

LaMar learned that just like having heart surgery, people can develop lots of scar tissue after having an episiotomy. So she began seeing Rohena Elavia, who specializes in women's health at Lake County Physical Therapy, who began massaging her scar. It seems to be helping, she says.

LaMar also opted for a labiaplasty. At first, LaMar says the post-operative pain was unbearable. "After a month I started to feel better and I'm so glad that I got it done."

LaMar and Dunbar are certainly not alone. A total of 16.2 million Americans had plastic surgery in 2006, including 1.6 million women who had cosmetic surgery, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. The number of women who have breast augmentation more than doubled in 2006 (329,396) compared to the number in 2000, while vaginal rejuvenation has surged by 30 percent in one year to 1,030 in 2006, according to ASPS.

Dunbar says she wouldn't have had the procedure for cosmetic reasons, but can see why women feel pressure to look more beautiful than ever, especially after becoming a mom.

"To keep up with society there is a huge pressure to stay fit and look good," Dunbar says.

Placik says many women he sees feel they have lost femininity and sexuality after child birth.

"A G-spot enhancement is how they reclaim their bodies and reclaim sexual attractions with their husbands," Placik says.

Still, in recent months the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists warned the vaginal "rejuvenation" and cosmetic vaginal procedures can cause complications such as infection, altered sensation, pain and scarring. That is why Chicago-based Dr. Greg Wiener, who specializes in cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, says it's always important to go to a board certified doctor.

Wierner says the woman must be healthy before electing to have plastic surgery even though the procedures are not inherently risky. That said, Wiener still cautions that having any type of surgery is a serious matter.

"It's not like going in and having your hair done," Wiener says. "People should be aware that if someone is promising overall fantastic result and telling them they won't have any down time then they aren't telling you the truth, because if it sounds too good to be true it usually is."