



THE TRUTH ABOUT A TUMMY TUCK

Money—and pain—were a small price to pay for getting rid of THE GUT ▶ by Penny Musco

FOR AS LONG as I can remember, Mom's belly has jiggled like wet mud. I vowed I'd never let myself get like that. Yet despite my best intentions—diet and exercise and two fewer children than Mom—I too developed what my family calls The Gut. Genetics won, hands down.

I hated The Gut. In my childbearing years, people asked whether I was pregnant when I wasn't. Clothes that looked good on top turned bad when they hit my midsection. When your tummy has been stretched out like mine, even the best exercises can't make a dent. [But for most women, they will—see pg. 148.] Liposuction sounded promising, but I couldn't afford it.

Then suddenly I could, thanks to a small inheritance from a distant relative. I set out to lose The Gut; this is the story of how I did it.

NOVEMBER 9, 2006

I choose Vincent Giampapa, MD, the doctor who did a terrific job stitching up my toddler's torn eyelid 17 years ago (don't ask, it was gruesome), for my first cosmetic surgery consultation. He confirms what I already suspect, that no amount of sit-ups and dieting will ever make The Gut go away completely.

He recommends an abdominoplasty, more familiarly known as a tummy tuck: the removal of excess skin and fat plus the tightening of connective tissue (fascia) that has stretched. I'm still trying to absorb the fact that this is more extensive surgery than I'd realized when his assistant hits me with the price tag: \$12,000. Although that includes the hospital, it's still more than I expected.

DECEMBER 4

A week before my fifty-second birthday, I'm standing in my bra and a teensy paper bikini in front of another plastic surgeon. I'd seen an advertisement for an open house at the office of Paul LoVerme, MD, a few weeks earlier, so I went to check him out. I liked him and made an appointment. Now, as Dr. LoVerme manipulates my fat, I remind myself this is a clinical assessment, not a judgment on whether I've gone to seed. Unlike Dr. Giampapa, he insists on an overnight stay in the hospital after the operation. That pushes my decision: If I have the surgery, I'll go with Dr. LoVerme. No knock against my husband's instinct

HOW PENNY CHANGED



BEFORE



AFTER



DROPPED ONE DRESS SIZE

1 1/4 CUPS OF FAT SUCKED OUT

5 LBS LOST



for nursing, but I'd feel better having professionals see me through the first 24 hours post-op. Next I'm led to the photography studio, so my "before" shots can be taken. Dr. LoVerme's assistant coaches me on how to pose for the different views. "I feel like a porn star," I joke as the doctor snaps away. They smile only slightly; I guess they hear that a lot. The price is about the same as with Dr. Giampapa. Now I just need to decide whether to pull the trigger.

WINTER 2007

Months go by as I ponder the lunacy of spending five figures for a new figure. But my real concerns are more emotional. I've read about women who died during liposuction and other cosmetic surgeries. What if the same thing happened to me—wouldn't *that* be embarrassing? Am I selfish and vain? Maybe I'm wasting a financial windfall on a problem that would go away if I just tried a little harder. Then I picture Mom, over 80 and still fighting to get rid of her bulge, and I know The Gut is here to stay. My husband, Joe, and I have been fiscally responsible. We have steady jobs and a modest emergency fund, our bills are paid, we save for retirement and give to charity. Like all of us, I will die when my time comes. So there, I tell myself. Shut up already.

MARCH 25

I've got to stop waffling and make a decision. Joe offers to get the vacuum cleaner and suck out all the fat himself. I tell him, "What I really need you to do is honestly tell me either that it's OK to spend all this money, or that I'm way too shallow and need to get over it." He shoves the decision back where it belongs: in my abundant lap. "If it's what you want to do," he answers, "then do it."

MARCH 26

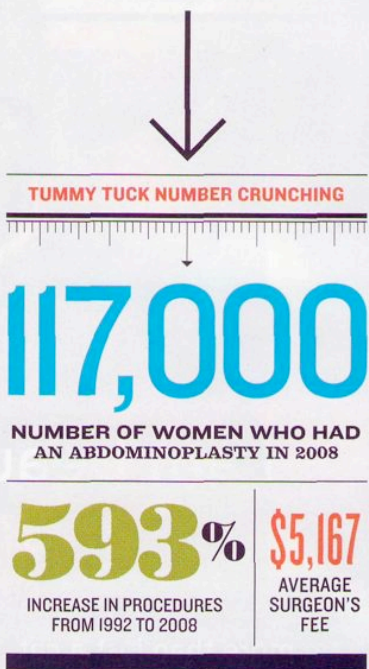
I call Dr. LoVerme's office and schedule the surgery for July 10. No backing out now: I may be nuts, but I'm not giving up a \$500 nonrefundable deposit.

APRIL 2

At my annual gynecological checkup, I mention to my doctor that I'm having the operation. She smiles with satisfaction when I tell her I'm using Dr. LoVerme. I'm feeling that it's all going to be OK when she adds, "Just to let you know, it hurts like hell."

LATE SPRING

Uh oh. Our daughter Mimi is thinking of coming home for the summer rather than staying at college. I'd love to have her around, but I wasn't planning to tell her about the operation



until afterward. Whenever I fantasize out loud about plastic surgery, Mimi goes into her lofty, know-it-all young adult mode, pronounces she's against it and says she totally loves her body. "That's nice," I counter. "I don't love mine." At this point Joe usually interjects, "Do I have to separate you two?"

The idea of Mimi knowing in advance raises some uncomfortable questions: Would my having surgery put a dent in *her* positive self-image? Am I still obliged to worry about what

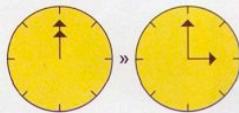


kind of message I'm sending her? Can I handle her disapproval? When I agonize over it with Joe, he says Mimi has to realize I'm a big girl who makes her own decisions, some of which our daughter may not agree with.



WHAT TO EXPECT AFTER SURGERY

FOUR TO SIX:
WEEKS YOU SHOULD LAY OFF EXERCISE WHILE YOUR INCISION HEALS



3: Hours it takes to perform the procedure

2% LESS THAN RISK OF INFECTION POSTSURGERY

0 NUMBER OF CIGARETTES YOU SHOULD SMOKE FOR A MONTH AFTER THE OPERATION. THE REASON: NICOTINE HAMPERS HEALING

WEEKS OF RECOVERY TIME

2

NUMBER OF DRESS SIZES YOU CAN EXPECT TO GO DOWN

beef on a cow. Joe kisses me, and I'm wheeled into the operating room. Mercifully, I'm out cold as Dr. LoVerme makes a horizontal incision from hip to hip just above my pubic bone. The skin and fat layers are separated from my abdominal wall and lifted up to my rib cage. Dr. LoVerme sutures the stretched fascia, sucks out 300 milliliters of fat, then stretches the skin and remaining fat tightly over my stomach, removing the 46-centimeter-long, 20-centimeter-wide excess. I also get a new belly button hole.

When I come to, three hours later, I'm aware of a stiff girdle around my midsection. I'm awake enough to tell Joe he doesn't have to stick around now that we've all determined I'm still alive. I drift in and out of sleep in between visits from the nurses, who check my vitals and instruct me in the use of the self-administered pain medication drip labeled *morphine*. I'm assured I won't turn into a dope fiend, but I vow to use it only sparingly. I finally become more fully conscious around 4:30. I summon a nurse and declare that I will get up and sit in a chair. My daughter was born by C-section, and I expect to feel the same tugging, sharp pain I had then, but surprisingly, it's less of a pain and more of a tight achiness. I can't seem to straighten up, though. I eat a little dinner and even manage to go to the bathroom by myself, then decide I've had enough. I abandon my plan to tough it out and take a few hits of morphine so I can float off to la-la land.

Whew. Mimi decides to stay at college. I relegate all those pesky uncertainties to the back of my mind and get excited about the big day!

JULY 30

My husband bids farewell to The Gut as I dress. At the hospital, I get a little teary because I'm suddenly very nervous. "If I die, tell the family I'm sorry," I beg Joe, who's trying hard not to laugh. Dr. LoVerme arrives to mark me up, which reminds me of those pictures showing the different cuts of

JULY 11

I must have gotten up at least four times during the night to use the bathroom, each episode requiring me to ring the nurse, cautiously roll out of bed and then shuffle, Neanderthal-like, to the toilet, pushing my IV pole before me. My bountiful urine production is a good sign, I'm told, signifying that my kidneys are quickly getting rid of the anesthesia. After each trip, I allow myself a couple of clicks of my new best friend, because the pain has definitely ratcheted up. Dr.

REINVENT
YOUR
MIDDLE

LoVerme comes in around noon, checks his handiwork and declares it good. I sense he's touching my abdomen, but I can't feel a thing. He informs me that the numbness will last awhile and, worse, that I can't take a shower

the outside steps like a 90-year-old and start wondering what's up. He settles me into a recliner, and I doze the rest of the afternoon. That night, I tell Joe I'm not sure when we'll have sex next, and he stares at me in horror.

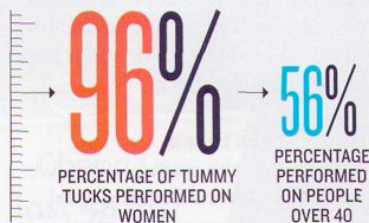
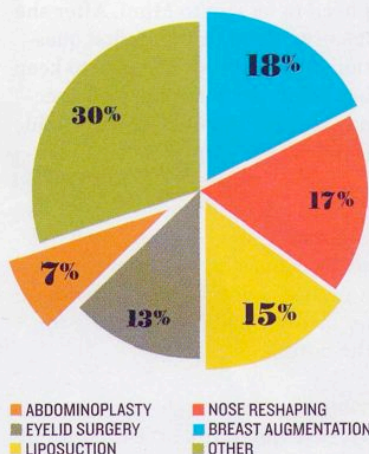
JULY 12

I continue to produce pee like a champion. Joe doesn't leave for work until I get situated again in the recliner, where I park my butt for most of the day. Sitting is the easy part; it's the getting up and moving around that makes it seem like my innards are about to bust out. Coughing and laughing are to be avoided at all costs. I remind myself that I felt the same way after Mimi's birth, yet managed to keep my intestines from unspooling in the living room. The prescription pain medication makes me feel weird, so I skip it and take acetaminophen instead. "I think I feel better," I announce to Joe when he comes home. "Oh boy," he replies, "does that mean we can have sex now?" He's probably joking, but I give him a withering look just to be on the safe side.

JULY 13

Time to unwrap for a shower and for my new tummy's first appearance, head on, in the mirror. Looking at my new self, *unnatural* is the word that leaps to mind. My new belly button hole is a deep triangle laced with tiny stitches. I'm a little sad that my cesarean scar has been swallowed up in my new hip-to-hip "smile," which is lumpy and red and downright ugly. The whole area is bruised and slightly swollen, the skin waxy and hard—but The Gut is definitely gone! Without the girdle's support, I realize just how tight my abdominal area is now. As Joe helps me towel off after a blissful, long overdue shower, he decides the incision should be all dry before I'm rewrapped, so he uses the hair dryer to gently blow warm air on it. (This is not a process recommended by doctors, by the way; since your body is numb, you might get burned without realizing it.) »

COSMETIC SURGERY, 2008



STATISTICS SOURCES: AMERICAN SOCIETY OF PLASTIC SURGEONS AND PHIL HAECK, MD

for two days. He leaves me feeling grubby and a little fearful of facing the pain once I'm home.

As Joe accompanies me out of the hospital, I say, "I'm cranky," and he doesn't disagree. When he pulls into our driveway, he delicately suggests I go into the house by way of the garage, so our neighbors don't see me climbing

JULY 16

At my first post-op appointment, Dr. LoVerme is pleased with my healing.

JULY 17

I call Mom to tell her about the operation, bracing myself for her reaction. It's not what I expected. "You're so brave! I'm proud of you!" she exclaims. *Brave? Proud?* Not foolish or vain? Not crazy for throwing my money around? She wants to see a picture, so Joe e-mails her a side shot of me (clothed), even though I'm still slightly hunched over. She says I look great. "I'm just glad you didn't tell me beforehand, because I would have been worried sick." Now *that* I expected.

JULY 20

"Look, I'm standing upright!" I announce, walking proudly into the kitchen. "It's evolution," Joe replies, then returns to his newspaper.

THE NEXT WEEK

With the doctor's approval, I begin simple leg and arm exercises, and resume my daily walks. The tautness of my frozen, discolored midsection is a hindrance though: one wrong move and I imagine it will snap up like a broken window shade and smack me in the face. I'm frustrated that it takes me a half hour to go less than a mile, but as the days go by, I feel a little looser.

What I'm most anxious about is my clothing. I'm sick of looking like an old man, with my elastic-waist shorts pulled up above my navel. The swelling won't allow me to fit into even my most forgiving pair of zippered shorts, and if it did, the metal would irritate the incision.

So I concentrate on my upper half. Preoperation, I always wore tops that hid my figure instead of accentuating it. But when I pull on a snug T-shirt I'd never dared wear before, Joe exclaims, "Wow!" Spurred on by his appreciation, I hit the stores. I buy a few more formfitting tops, a sleek dress, and better bras. For the first

time in two decades, I try on several two-piece bathing suits, the kind whose bottoms are high enough to cover my scar. "Nice," Joe says. For a man who hardly ever commented on my clothing in 32 years of marriage, this is an outpouring of praise. Needless to say, we figure out how to resume marital relations.

AUGUST 15

The swelling's down, and I'm back in all my shorts. I've even added a few pairs of body-hugging pants, which Joe also enjoys. But today's the day I need to fess up to Mimi. After she hears my revelation, her first question is, how did we manage to keep her in the dark for so long? The second is, how much did it cost? Aside from being astounded that her notoriously tight-fisted mother dropped serious bucks for elective surgery, she's surprisingly low-key in her reaction. I'm relieved, but wonder if it's maturity or because she's wrapped up in boyfriend issues. I vote for the latter.

FEBRUARY 25

My last appointment. Dr. LoVerme takes more photos, then shows me the difference. The contrast is amazing. My scar's still purplish red, but he says it will fade to white by the anniversary of my surgery.

THREE YEARS LATER

As a result of the surgery I lost five pounds and several inches around my waist and hips, and I've managed to keep it that way. As Dr. LoVerme predicted, the scar is now white and almost invisible, and as I expected, I now enjoy looking at my naked self a whole lot more than I did before. But the biggest change is more of a surprise to me: Without The Gut, I feel freer, lighter, sexier, more confident.

I hope that's the message Mimi hears. Because she's got the same body as her grandma and I do, and I wouldn't be surprised if we see The Gut again—this time on her. 🍷