

## **Tummy Tuck: A Patient's Journey**

My problems all started 29 years ago when I gave birth to twins. Of course I thought they were gorgeous and loved them to bits, but the pregnancy did untold amounts of damage to my stomach muscles. In those early years I did all the recommended exercises – pelvic floor workouts and such – but nothing worked. I simply could not shift the apron style stomach I had been left with.

After a year my GP referred me for surgical assessment. However, it took me a whole three years to get an appointment, and even then, there was only disappointment in store. I was recommended for surgery, and I got as far as being admitted to a ward. But during routine pre-op checks I was found to have a blood clot on my lung, a complication of being on the pill. I was no longer able to proceed with the procedure, and quite frankly, I was devastated.

Knowing the operation was no longer an option caused my confidence levels to plummet. For the next 25 years I dressed to ensure everything was covered up, I comfort ate and I put on a lot of weight. My appearance made me very depressed. Even just looking at photos of myself made me feel teary. I did try serial dieting, but it didn't really work: my stomach muscles had separated during pregnancy and no amount of exercise or weight loss could fix that. But because of my blood clot I couldn't undergo the necessary surgery. I just felt helpless.

Then everything changed when I heard about Lisa. A lady I worked with had a tummy tuck under her care and after a bit of encouragement from her I made an appointment. Living in the Midlands it was quite a way to travel, but my colleague was so enthusiastic, it really inspired confidence in me. Even so, the journey down to Bristol was quite tense. After all, I am only 5ft 4" tall and, at that point, weighed 14.5 stones. I was unfit, grossly overweight and had a poor medical history. I was convinced Lisa would take one look at me and turn me away.

I couldn't have been more wrong. Lisa told that in actual fact, she could help me. What's more, she didn't judge me and she didn't tell me to lose weight. She's not like that. Instead she offers hope to those who believe there is nowhere to turn. After that I didn't care about the distance. I didn't want to see another surgeon; if anyone could help me, it was Lisa.

My husband will tell you that I was floating on air all the way home after that initial meeting. But I did have some serious thinking to do. There were health risks because of my previous clot, and Lisa told me to carefully consider whether I should go through with it. She also insisted that I see a psychiatrist. This was very useful and it ensured I didn't go into the operation with false expectations. A tummy tuck isn't a cure: Lisa can do the procedure, but I would have to do the rest. It helped me to view the operation not as a one-hit-wonder, but rather as a catalyst to change my lifestyle.

After a lot of soul searching I decided to go through with surgery. I was admitted to hospital the night before and the nurses completed a pre-operative assessment, after which Lisa came to draw lines on me. The following morning I was so excited; I had waited nearly 30 years for this and I just couldn't wait. My husband, on the other hand, was extremely anxious, especially when I was brought back to the ward after the procedure. You wake up in a special bed that keeps your knees bent and I suppose it can look a bit scary, particularly

as you have a drip and a catheter in situ. But I wasn't in any pain. Lisa injects anaesthetic into the wound, and you have a morphine pump that you can press any time you need pain relief. The nurses were always on hand if I needed them, and Lisa kept a very close eye on me. Overall I felt extremely well taken care of.

After a further two nights in hospital I was discharged. My husband and I booked a cottage near Bristol for a week as I wanted to be near the hospital. I couldn't sit down or get up on my own for the whole of that week, which was in part due to the extent of surgical intervention Lisa had performed. She didn't just remove tummy skin and fat, she also had to do internal repair work to the muscles that had split. I was therefore very tight in the abdominal area. I also found that my appetite had halved. Lisa later explained that because my muscles were so badly damaged I didn't have a 'full-up switch'. Instead I just carried on eating without feeling satisfied. For the first time since giving birth I actually felt full. Overnight my portion size was cut down by a third.

It took a full eight weeks until I was standing upright and fully recovered. And I cannot tell you just how different I looked, even just two months after surgery. Many people assumed I had had a gastric bypass, so dramatic were the results. It's now been four years since the op, and I've lost four stone – all because I am able to control my portion size. But I've not just benefitted physically; the effect on my mental and emotional state has been incredible. I'm more confident, I'm happier and my marriage is stronger than ever. It has had a positive impact on every aspect on my life, and I now find myself doing things I would never have done before – I've done a degree for my job, I buy girly clothes and I even wear a bi-kini!

Now when I look at old pictures of myself I cannot believe it's me. I'm a completely different person, both on the outside and the inside. And when people ask if I would recommend the procedure to others (because it is a major operation) I say that if you're in a position where you're uncomfortable with the way they look, then yes, it's well worth it. My own personal experience has been fantastic and can never thank Lisa enough. Throughout the whole process she remained honest, direct and above all, empathetic. She offered me hope at a time when I was at a complete loss, and ultimately, she gave me the chance to change my life.