

Teens Under the Knife

by Dr. Mokhtar Asaadi

The number of teens who seek cosmetic surgery has been increasing nationally, with summertime being the busiest season for students. According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic surgery (ASAPS), surgical procedures on patients 18 or younger increased 24 percent between 2000 and 2002. ASAP also states that noninvasive procedures, including chemical peel, laser hair removal and microdermabrasion, were the most popular procedures in 2001 for this age group. Plastic surgery has become more common in every demographic and more affordable because of financing plans. These days, it is not uncommon to see a teenager come into a

physician's office with his or her parent(s) requesting reconstructive or cosmetic surgery. After all, teens are used to the idea because their baby boomer parents have had procedures, and TV shows make it more commonplace.

Peer pressure

Many adults minimize kids' discontent with their bodies and argue that self esteem issues are normal for teenagers. In my New Jersey practice, I have had many teenagers request cosmetic procedures such as breast augmentations and rhinoplasty procedures.

In today's society, teenagers are very self-conscious about their looks. With the

increase of beautiful teen icons comes a resurgence of teens wanting to emulate these superstars. There is a tremendous amount of peer pressure now more than ever before. For some teenage patients, cosmetic plastic surgery can help foster emotional and physical development.

The plastic surgeon must make clear, between the patient and guardian that the teen's expectations are unmistakably understood and the appropriate operation is selected. It is vital that both the parent and the teen be honest about their feelings regarding any cosmetic operation. Teen patients need to have a realistic expectation of what to expect from plastic surgery.



The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery offers the following guidelines for evaluating teenagers who are considering cosmetic plastic surgery.

Assess physical maturity. Operating on a feature that has not yet fully developed could interfere with its growth, or continued growth could negate the benefits of surgery in later years.

Explore emotional maturity and expectations. The young person should appreciate the benefits and limitations of the proposed surgery and have realistic expectations.

Check credentials. State laws permit any licensed physician to be called a "plastic" or "cosmetic" surgeon, even if not trained as a surgeon. Parents should look for certification by the American Board of Plastic Surgery. If the doctor operates in an ambulatory or office based facility, the facility should be accredited. Additionally, the surgeon should have operating privileges in an accredited hospital for the same procedure being considered.

Explore risks and expected recovery times. Teens and their parents should understand the risks of surgery, postoperative restrictions on activity and typical recovery times.

Rhinoplasty is the most commonly requested cosmetic procedure for teenagers. The nose has finished most of its growth by age 13 or 14 in girls and 15 or 16 in boys.

Helps self-esteem

Most experts agree that for appropriately selected teenage patients, cosmetic plastic surgery can have a positive impact on physical and emotional development. Although certainly not appropriate in every case, I believe that plastic surgery can do a young person a world of good.

For example, a child with a large or humped nose or a young woman (or young man) with breasts so large that he or she either literally cannot or refuses to participate in sports or social activities is likely to be very unhappy. With surgical correction, the miserable young person often blossoms in new ways. It's not what the surgery does to the child; it's what the child chooses to do with the surgery. Cosmetic surgery in teens should be approached with caution, yet, at the same time, viewed as a potential opportunity for the teenager.

Most popular procedures

Some of the most common surgical operations for teenagers are as follows:

Rhinoplasty: Rhinoplasty is the most commonly requested cosmetic procedure for teenagers. The nose has finished most of its growth by age 13 or 14 in girls and 15 or 16 in boys.

Otoplasty: Otherwise known as ear pinback surgery, otoplasty is one of the few operations performed on very young children—even as young as 5.

Breast reduction: Breast reduction can help girls as young as 15 who are embarrassed by very large breasts. Large breasts can cause shoulder pain,

breathing difficulties and embarrassment in social situations.

Correction of breast asymmetry: Surgery can be performed when one breast significantly differs from the other either in size or shape. Even though operations to correct breast asymmetry can help girls as young as 16, most doctors wait until full growth has occurred. Except in cases of asymmetry and post-trauma reconstruction, federal regulations prohibit breast implants for those under 18.

Chin augmentation: Chin augmentation often is performed in conjunction with rhinoplasty to achieve facial balance.

Lipoplasty: Lipoplasty (liposuction) may be appropriate for a select number of teenagers of normal weight with localized fat deposits when diet and exercise fail to achieve results. Stubborn fat deposits can be a hereditary condition.

Attitudes

According to an ASAPS survey, public confidence in cosmetic plastic surgery has consistently shown growing acceptance of elective procedures. Even though there has been an increase over the last few years, data so far conclude that those 18 and under are not seeking these procedures in disproportionately rising numbers. In fact, a 2002 consumer survey sponsored by ASAPS showed that 18-to-24-year-olds (the youngest age group surveyed) are the least likely of any group to approve of cosmetic surgery. Only 48 percent said they approve of cosmetic surgery, compared to 60 percent of baby boomers age 45 to 54.

In addition, in a recent survey found on a Web site aimed toward teens, nearly 15,000 teenagers were asked how they feel about teens and cosmetic plastic surgery. The majority, 54 percent (7,622), responded that it depends on the situation. If a child or teen feels physically inadequate and this affects him or her socially or academically, the respondents said that it was acceptable to look into treatment options. Also, survey respondents said that congenital defects, scarring, loss of facial function, or facial asymmetry, which can create unnecessary distress, should be corrected with treatment or surgery.

The important thing to note in these survey results is that plastic surgery is an option that this age group considers.

Before deciding on a procedure or treatment option, teenagers need to think about what they hope to achieve if they change their appearance.

Think it over

Here are some questions for teens and parents to consider before cosmetic surgery takes place.

Why do you want to change your appearance? Teenagers must discover why they feel insecure. Are the concerns well founded? Teens who pursue facial plastic or reconstructive surgery are looking to have a better self image and feel more confident.

What feature do you want to correct? Rhinoplasty, including cosmetic and reconstructive surgery (e.g., correcting a nasal obstruction or cleft palate reconstruction), is the most popular procedure performed on teenagers. Other surgeries that may be appropriate include otoplasty, blepharoplasty (eyelid surgery), chin augmentation and scar revision.

What are your expectations for the results? Before deciding on a procedure or treatment option, teenagers need to think about what they hope to achieve if they change their appearance.

Open communication between the teenager and parent is extremely important. The parent and child must consider whether the procedure will truly impact the quality of the teen's life, or if it's just something superficial to help him or her "fit in" or conform to the latest fad.

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