

Vaginal Rejuvenation: The New Wave Of Cosmetic Surgery

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By Vivek Kemp

First she had her breasts done. Then 12 years and two kids later she changed something else, something more private, much more private. Her vagina.

Lu Henderson, a real estate investor from Los Angeles, noticed that her enjoyment of sex diminished after giving birth for the second time. Then three years ago, while she was in a fancy health club, she overheard a conversation about a surgery that could help. And last month she decided it was time to commit.



"It's the most amazing thing I've ever done," said Henderson, 34, about her surgery. "I really do just feel more feminine."

Henderson is one of a growing number of women who have turned to cosmetic surgery to reverse the ravages of time and birth through a surgical procedure called vaginal rejuvenation.

The process, which tightens vaginal muscles and reduces the size of a woman's labia minora, is designed to increase sexual gratification and reduce forms of incontinence.

The actual procedure of tightening the muscle tone of interior vaginal walls is nothing new; women have been receiving such corrective surgery since the 1970s for medical reasons. But the outpatient surgery is the latest thing for the nip-tuck set.

The recognized grandfather of the industry in the United States is Dr. David Matlock, an obstetrician-gynecologist in Los Angeles.

Matlock put rejuvenation into the public sphere in the late 1990s, when he founded the Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Institute of Los Angeles. Since then, he has been the subject of multiple articles in magazines ranging from *Cosmopolitan* to *Playboy*.

Such coverage has been the best commercial for the surgery, Matlock said.

"Sex sells, and the media has an integral part in selling it," he said. "Women will come in and say, 'I want to look like this,' while they hold up a *Playboy*."

Yet some plastic surgeons feel that being saturated with images of sex leads to a false notion of normality.

"Part of this is the mainstreaming of pornography," said Dr. V. Leroy Young, a plastic surgeon in St. Louis. "People see images of naked women on magazines and movies and that becomes a reference point of normal."

However, Henderson said health concerns drove her decision as well.

She said that when she gave birth, the incision made on her perineum, the muscle and tissue between the vagina and the anus, never healed properly. She suffered many bladder infections as a result, she said.

"At first I went to just get that fixed," Henderson said.

But when the doctor examined her, he told her she had vaginal relaxation, which causes interior muscles to go limp.

Never mind the motives for the surgery; the result is great sex.

"I wasn't doing it for anybody but me, but my fiancé benefits from it," said Nelly, an executive assistant for an investment firm in Los Angeles who requested that only her first name be used.

Both Henderson and Nelly said men are easy to please in general, and that vaginal rejuvenation is truly for the enjoyment of women.

"Let's be honest," Henderson said, "guys aren't really picky; they could care less. It was really more for me."

But rejuvenation isn't only the realm of mothers and grown women. Many teenage girls seek the help of doctors in reducing the size of their labia in an offshoot procedure called labiaplasty.

Matlock has operated on a 14-year-old who was accompanied by her parents and her younger sister. "Mothers are in 100 percent support," the doctor said. Speaking about the physical development of the young teens, Matlock said, "These are mature young ladies. If they weren't I wouldn't do it."

But some doctors like Young think some colleagues may be going too far. He performs labiaplasty on occasion, but said he's not necessarily a fan of the surgery or its cousins.

"This is not something I promote," the doctor said. "If the labia minora is too large, they can become irritated with clothes and swimsuits, but it's easier to just get a different swimsuit."

A new set of clothes would definitely be less expensive. Rejuvenation comes at a price, costing anywhere from \$3,000 to \$20,000. Young said he was not sure if the recent popularity of vaginal rejuvenation would last.

"We don't understand very accurately what's driving this," he said. "We're still in the unknown area with this, is it a fad or a longer lasting trend?"

If this is a fad, it's not going away anytime soon. The industry is too lucrative and growing too fast, according to doctors.

Last year Matlock earned \$1.4 million and said the demand is too much for him to handle alone.

At his center in Los Angeles, Matlock says he has trained hundreds of ob-gyns, including 40 doctors from the United States and many more from Asian Pacific countries like Korea, to perform the surgery.

"The women are driving this," Matlock said.

As far as Henderson is concerned, she is content with her body for the time being. But she's comforted by knowing that she can have more cosmetic procedures if she wants them.

"I'll have maintenance done," she said. "As I age I think I'll get Botox, or collagen injections for my lips."