

More Women Seek Vaginal Plastic Surgery

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*By Sandy Kobrin
WeNews correspondent*

Surgery to reshape the labia and other areas of the vagina is picking up fast, say plastic surgeons. While some women undergo the operations to improve comfort, many want to conform to ideals set by the porn industry.

LOS ANGELES (WOMENSENEWS)--She was 20 years old and had never contemplated plastic surgery. But one day at the gym, the pretty, smooth-faced receptionist in a Los Angeles doctor's office looked at her vagina and noticed that her inner vaginal labia stuck out past her outer labia. She was horrified.

"I looked in like, those magazines, and saw that inner labia shouldn't stick out like mine did," said Crystal, who requested her last name be withheld. "So I had a labiaplasty and now I love the way I look; nice and neat and new. My vagina looks perfect."

In a labiaplasty, the surgical reshaping of female external genital structures, larger or uneven inner vaginal lips are cut and shortened.

Dr. V. Leroy Young, chair of the emerging trends task force of the Arlington Heights, IL., American Society of Plastic Surgeons, believes labiaplasty and vaginal cosmetic surgery are the fastest growing emerging growth trend in cosmetic plastic surgery.

While the organization has no exact numbers yet nationwide, Young noted that more and more doctors were querying the organization, inquiring about learning the procedure. In addition, the physicians that perform vaginal cosmetic surgery have reported enormous increases in patients, particularly over the past decade.

Dr. Pamela Loftus, a plastic surgeon in Boca Raton, Fla., has been performing labiaplasties and vaginal cosmetic surgeries for over 20 years.

Since she put up a Web site two and a half years ago, her business has increased and she's been bombarded with queries. Loftus said she does around six labiaplasties a week. "For the past two years we have been avalanched with phone calls from women who have been made aware of the surgery and want it," Dr. Loftus said.

Physicians advertising vaginal cosmetic procedures surgeries are peppered throughout magazines across the country as this type of cosmetic surgery grows in popularity. As society pressures women to look younger and more perfect, many physicians believe the popularity of these types of surgeries will continue to grow.

Cosmetic surgery in general is on the rise. About 870,000 cosmetic procedures were performed in 2003, a 6.7 percent increase over 2002, according to American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery statistics. These surgeries include breast augmentation, gluteal implants, liposuctions, face lifts, and others, including labiaplasties.

"The numbers for labiaplasty are increasing every year and I think the procedure has finally been accepted in the mainstream," Young said. "This was once a procedure that fell under the radar and now you have women coming in and asking for it."

Former Domain of Sex Workers

Labiaplasty was once the domain of sex workers, nude entertainers, nude models, swimsuit models and the occasional woman who needed her labia reduced for medical reasons such as infection or pain. Not anymore. Doctors have reported that women from every walk of life and from ages 15 to 75 are having labia and cosmetic vaginal surgery.

Many doctors who perform the surgeries say while there are some women who opt for the surgery because they are unhappy or their labia has caused them physical discomfort, the bulk of the women getting this surgery are ultimately being pressured by men who want them to conform to a idea of beauty most often seen in the porn industry. Doctors say these women request the procedure because they are afraid of having "old looking" vaginas. Doctors Loftus and Young say feedback from male partners is the number one reason women request the surgery.

"The most common reason we hear is that they have had a negative comment made by a male sexual partner. Women are made to feel that they are not perfect the way they are and often it's the partner that sets this off," Loftus said.

"My feeling is that women who aren't sex workers are getting this kind of thing because there's pressure from someone who's telling them they're not perfect," Young said. 'There's often pressure from a man who tells them they need it," adding "I assume that their standards for labial beauty were set by a combination of the porn industry, sex-oriented magazines and the Internet."

Sign of Aging

Los Angeles gynecologist Dr. David Matlock, who says he performs more vaginal cosmetic surgery than anyone else in the country, claims women are having labiaplasties and other forms of vaginal cosmetic surgery because "longer, lose hanging inner lips is a sign of aging and women don't want to look old there, either."

"Even young women will look at loose hanging labia as a sign of aging and want to have it done," he said.

Loftus, the Florida surgeon, agreed. "Youth-enhancing surgery is very common now. Why should it stop with the face? Girls 20 to 30 years old now want every part of their body to look as young as they are."

"Women want to be tight," said Matlock. "They don't want

sagging or loose labia. I can't tell you how many pages and pages of pornographic material woman have brought into me saying 'I want to look like this.'"

"Ever since I had the surgery, I feel young and free and prettier for my boyfriend," Crystal said. "Even if it's something nobody else can see, I feel better. It's not on my mind all the time anymore."

Another cosmetic surgery--vaginal rejuvenation--is also rising. It entails tightening the vaginal and perineum area, often stretched during childbirth. Some doctors also claim it increases sexual pleasure for both partners.

"I've had women who come in and say to me, 'He's small can you tighten me up'" said Matlock, who said he performed between 40 to 60 vaginal cosmetic surgeries a month in his Beverly Hills practice, charging around \$5,000 for a labiaplasty. He said he grosses \$250,000 a month performing these surgeries and noted he has had women come in from all over the world for vaginal cosmetic surgery.

Downside Risk

Some doctors dispute whether constructing a tighter vagina increases a woman's sexual pleasure. "Yes you can do the rejuvenation to have a tighter vagina," said Young. "But anytime you make an incision you cut nerves, induce scarring and there is a downside risk, including pain."

"Plastic surgery is being way over used in many different ways" said Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women. "There's something off about what's going on in our culture that makes women feel they need to live up to some ideal."

Ileana Vasquez is a 29 year-old Southern California housewife with four children. She read about vaginal rejuvenation after she saw an ad in a magazine. Her marriage was in trouble and she noted that her husband wasn't happy with her sexually.

"One time he had a few beers and told me that because I had all our kids and was looser now he didn't want me as a woman anymore," Vasquez said. "He did say he was sorry later on but I knew he was telling the truth."

Vasquez had the surgery and she noted her marriage is back on track and her sex life is good again. "He's become my sweetheart again," she said. "He bought me a house and he wants me all the time."

Then she paused. "But there are times I still can't forgive him for how he made me feel," she said. "Sometimes I get so mad, so hurt. I mean I had the kids, he should have understood."

Sandy Kobrin is a Los Angeles based writer who specializes in writing about women's issues and criminal justice.