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Question 11: Will this hurt?

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10 questions to ask before committing to cosmetic surgery

What do you need to know before committing to cosmetic surgery? Consultant dermatologist and phlebologist Dr Adrian Lim lists the 10 most important things to consider.

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1. What are the practitioner's qualifications?

The minimum requirement for a doctor is that they be registered with their state medical board. In Australia, cosmetic procedures are carried out by a variety of medical practitioners. A laser procedure, for instance, may be performed by any of the following: a specialist dermatologist, a specialist surgeon, a cosmetic doctor, a GP or, in some cases, a cosmetic nurse practitioner. As cosmetic procedures become increasingly non-invasive and non-surgical, the types of practitioners have become more diverse. This can be confusing for the patient. The ideal is to look for the most qualified and experienced practitioner for that procedure.

2. What is the practitioner's experience in this area?

This should be a critical factor in selecting the right doctor. Ask, or find out, if the doctor specialises in that particular area (for example, breast augmentation). Some surgeons may specialise in facelifts, others will be happier doing body liposuction. Some are experts in minimally invasive procedures such as injectables and lasers.

3. Who will be doing the procedure?

The assumption is that the doctor you consult will be doing the procedure. This is not always the case, especially in a multi-faceted cosmetic practice. GPs and nurse injectors may work with specialist dermatologists, plastic surgeons or cosmetic physicians. In this context, these non-specialist practitioners are often highly trained and very skilled in their particular area and will often provide a comparable level of service.

4. Is the procedure right for me?

Always ask this question and value the opinion of the specialist doctor. Many of the well-publicised cosmetic disasters (such as "English Trout Pout") are exaggerated outcomes of safe, conventional procedures pushed to the limit (usually at the request of the patient) rather than botched jobs. As a cosmetic dermatologist, I encounter patient directives to massively pump up the lips that would certainly end up looking disproportionate and odd. It is the doctor's ethical and professional duty to provide expert feedback regarding the optimum outcome for you — so always ask!

5. What are my other options?

There are usually several options for a given problem. Ask which procedure will give you the best outcome and why. Varicose veins, for example, can be treated either by vein stripping (very invasive) or by vein injections/lasers. It is essential to know your full options before committing to a procedure. At times, a combination approach works best.

6. When can I resume physical activity, exercise or work?

Get a clear idea of downtime. You can then effectively plan for the procedure by taking adequate time off work or exercise until you have sufficiently recovered.

7. Are there any side effects or complications?

Some doctors understate the side effects while others may be medico-legally cautious and exhaustively list all common and rare complications. Today patient information documents routinely list all the possible side effects and complications relating to the procedure. This can confuse and alarm patients. Always bring the discussion back to yourself — ask whether you are at special

risk for any complications and whether the doctor feels there are any concerns that should be discussed. For example, a patient with olive skin complexion undergoing laser skin treatment should be alerted to the increased risk of post-treatment darkening of the skin and measures to minimise this risk.

8. Will there be scars and if so, how obvious?

There is no such thing as scar-free surgery, which is one reason for the growth of minimally invasive cosmetic procedures. Many obvious and visible scars alert the world that you have had surgery. Most scars are hidden in natural skin creases and within the hairline, making them difficult to detect. Men undergoing hair transplant surgery may not be warned that the strip of hair at the back of the scalp (where the graft is harvested) may not re-grow and the hair will subsequently need to be kept long at the back to hide the scar.

9. What are the costs and are there any aftercare issues?

All fees and costs should be made available upfront. There should be no surprises. Certain procedures, such as repair of severe acne scarring, may attract a Medicare rebate, which will help offset the cost of the procedure. Cosmetic procedures are not generally refundable by Medicare. Private health funds will often cover any hospital stay (depending on your cover) but not the procedural fee itself. It is worth asking what happens after the surgery or procedure. If the procedure needs additional work or revision, will additional fees be incurred?

10. Can I have a look at before and after photos?

Before and after photos will give you an idea of what to expect. You should make allowance that these pictures are often showcasing the best of the practitioner's work — a parade of their "greatest hits". I often make a point of highlighting the average expected result rather than dwelling on exceptional results that may not be representative of the norm.

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