

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU COME HOME

You're finally home. Basically, you look like a Pillsbury doughboy that has been in an auto wreck. Between bouts of crying, shock, depression and exhaustion, you're staring at this unrecognizable face, trying to comprehend why you did this to yourself.

Do not panic! It's only a temporary state--it will all go away! And you will actually start to fall in love with the way you look by two to three weeks post-surgery.

I believe that the greatest oversight by most plastic surgeons is their failure to furnish the patient with a detailed explanation of symptoms they should expect to experience during the normal healing process. Too many doctor's offices assume an attitude of, "You're just more sensitive than most people," or, "Well, gee, it must be you--most people aren't upset or concerned," or, "You're just overreacting. Get a grip on yourself."

I don't know why these particular offices choose to deal with the postoperative period this way, but I consider it a monumental disservice to the patient. It's entirely possible that occasionally a person will be more sensitive than others. It's also possible that some of you luckier people will only experience very mild versions of the healing process. But the majority of you can expect the following normal symptoms during your first few weeks of recovery.

The first two to three weeks after surgery are commonly referred to as the "Distorted Period"...and when you're in it, you'll know why. You will probably be given steroids for swelling, but some swelling is very likely. The surprising thing about the swelling that follows facial surgery is that it never looks symmetrical. One cheek can look much larger than the other can. One eye can seem totally different in shape than the other. Many women are frightened that their doctor "didn't make them even." *Relax!* In 99 percent of the cases your surgeon made you look as even as possible. What you're looking at now is the postsurgical swelling, which distorts everything. And don't be the least bit surprised if the swelling shifts all over your face the first two to three weeks, because it most likely will.

In some areas, such as under the chin, the swelling will usually seem puffy and rock solid. Again, don't assume the surgeon didn't lift that area to your satisfaction. It will all soften up and then tighten up to where you had hoped it would be. Also, unattractive ridges or tucks may appear on areas of your cheeks or around the mouth. It's just swelling that will disappear and smooth out over the next few weeks. Not everyone develops these uneven areas, but if you do, just know that it's temporary and will flatten out in a little while.

Sometimes the swelling is so hard in spots that the doctor will send you for a few ultrasound treatments. This is extremely useful in breaking up stubborn swelling, and the patient experiences relief very quickly.

The glossy, masklike appearance that's obvious and temporary after a face-lift is also due to swelling. By the fourth week most women adore their faces because the distorted period has

passed, but there remains just enough swelling to plump out all the natural lines. Enjoy this stage while you can because as the swelling continues to disappear your natural lines will softly begin to return. Be thankful that they do. You don't want to be stuck with that mask-like face for the next several years. We've all seen women who have been surgically pulled too tight, and it's a horror show. Interestingly enough, the majority of those women have insisted their surgeon do this to them. *Huge mistake--don't you make it!*

Although you will probably begin to love your face by the third or fourth week post-op, there is no way you can begin to judge your final results until the end of the eighth week. By then the obvious swelling has disappeared, although the healing process will continue internally for several more months.

Most bruising goes through a predictable pattern of eggplant purple turning to a lovely brown-green and then to yellow before fading out. The amount of bruising varies with each individual and is impossible to accurately forecast. I've seen some woman who immediately go right into the final yellow stages, with just dabs of purple here and there. I've also seen women who bruise purple from their forehead clear down to their nipples, but that's the exception. Your doctor will instruct you when to use warm or cold compresses to assist in relieving both the swelling and the bruising.

Generally you can expect to be almost bruise-free by the fourth week after surgery. But don't worry. You won't have to hide for weeks. After about a week, if you're not discharging from an incision line and your eyes are infection-free, you can cover your existing bruises with makeup while they're taking their time to fade. Certain cosmetics cover bruising much more effectively than others do, and I'll get into that in detail in the next chapter. Do *not* apply makeup to any incision line before 48 hours after suture removal.

Know that you will be closely monitored by your doctor during a series of post-op check-ups, the first being the day following surgery. If you've had your eyes done, some stitches are removed the fourth or fifth day following surgery. Seven to ten days post-op, your face-lift stitches around the front of your ears are removed. Some stitches may be left in. If so, they're self-dissolving. If you had a forehead (or coronal) lift, the staples or stitches are removed 12 to 14 days after surgery, and the staples or stitches running diagonally behind the ears and up into the hairline are removed 10 to 14 days post-op. Office staff nurses will often remove stitches, staples, casts and so on. They are usually extremely skilled at all of this, and you needn't worry about allowing them to do their job.

You are normally checked again a week later and then for a final time four to six weeks after surgery. Of course, if you have ANY concerns about even the smallest pain, call your doctor that same day. Go in and let him see what you consider to be a problem. If it's a real issue, the doctor will treat it appropriately. If it is just part of your normal healing process, at least you'll get reassured and be able to relax again.

Incision lines have a distinctive healing process. They are bright pink in color before they fade to an unnoticeable white scar. The incisions that run in front of the ear contour normally remain quite thin. However, the incision that runs behind the ear tends to look wide and ropy at first, almost like gathered fabric. This ropiness eventually flattens out completely and the pinkness disappears.

You may have a small incision line under your chin, most probably just covered with surgical tape. The incision is made if your surgeon feels it is necessary to liposuction out some fat in order to give your face a sleeker line. The tape is usually removed the fourth day post-op. The incision line will flatten out and turn colorless like the others.