

## **OBESITY SURGERY... IS IT WORTH THE RISK?**

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Obesity has now become one of the leading causes of preventable death in the U.S. second only to smoking. With the numbers of overweight and obese Americans continually on the rise, we now have an epidemic of obesity that also includes vast numbers of American children.

Obesity surgery, also called bariatric surgery has been around since the 1950's but has gained popularity in recent years. Doctors are lining up to learn how to perform these lucrative surgeries and some hospitals have year-long waiting lists of patients. There are strict criteria for who are eligible for these various types of surgery but many patients are willing to gain even more weight to qualify. This is an indication of the desperation and of the willingness of some to resort to drastic measures to lose weight.

The fact is weight loss surgery produces results....in the short term. People do lose weight and very often, alleviate the conditions that are so often associated with obesity such as diabetes and hypertension. However, it is in the long term where results become variable. All too often, patients do not receive adequate pre-surgery counseling on what can only be described as drastic, life altering changes that will be made to their lifestyle and to their anatomy. These anatomical changes can cause significant vitamin and mineral deficiencies and a host of other problems. According to the American Society of Bariatric Surgeons, obesity surgery is "behavioral surgery" and as such, the outcome is largely independent of the skill of the surgeon. What does this mean? It means that a positive outcome of the surgery, or in other words, long-term maintenance of weight-loss, is dependent on the skill of the patient in handling whatever issues arise post-surgery. Since most morbidly obese patients have binge-eating disorder, failure by the patient to address the psychological issues associated with overeating pre-surgery can result in a return to previous behaviors and subsequent weight-gain post-surgery.

This doesn't mean that everyone who has the surgery (surgeries, there are several types) will gain the weight back. In the beginning, the anatomical changes to the stomach for example, force the patient to restrict food intake to very small amounts. Over time, however, the body adapts and intake can be increased. Those who take the time to adequately prepare themselves before surgery may find it easier to adhere to a prescribed regimen post surgery. But few programs exist that address the pre-operative preparation and nutritional needs of these patients. They are over-fed and undernourished; ninety percent have fatty infiltration of the liver. Surgery of any type is very stressful on the body and especially so for obese patients. Losing vast amounts of weight by what is essentially starvation puts additional stress on these patients physically as well as mentally.

Morbidly obese patients who are successful in losing large amounts of weight have an improved quality of life that was unimaginable to them before. For many, it is the only method that works. Doesn't it make sense that if someone is willing to endure what these patients must endure, they would take some measures to ensure that their suffering would be alleviated permanently? Whose responsibility is it to ensure that these patients are prepared and adequately educated about the long-term consequences of surgery? Isn't it a shame that so many are willing to risk their long-term health and even their lives for what may be a quick fix....only to gain back the weight? It's tragic.