What is an abdominoplasty?

An abdominoplasty (or 'tummy tuck') is an operation to improve the appearance of your abdomen. It may involve removing excess skin and fat and tightening your abdominal muscles.

Your surgeon will assess you and tell you if an abdominoplasty is suitable for you. However, it is your decision to go ahead with the operation or not.

This document will give you information about the benefits and risks to help you to make an informed decision. If you have any questions that this document does not answer, ask your surgeon or the healthcare team.

Is an abdominoplasty suitable for me?

It is common for the skin of your abdomen not to shrink back after pregnancy or losing a lot of weight. You are most likely to benefit from an abdominoplasty if your abdomen makes you feel uncomfortable or you are self-conscious about what your abdomen looks like.

Your surgeon will carry out a detailed assessment before deciding if surgery is suitable for you. This may include taking photos for your medical records. They will examine your abdomen and ask you questions about your medical history.

Your surgeon will check if you are the right weight for your height. If you are overweight, it may be better to lose weight before having surgery.

Let your surgeon know if you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant in the future. Pregnancy can change the appearance of your abdomen and may affect the long-term results of surgery.

What are the benefits of surgery?

Your abdomen should be firmer and have a better shape. If you have excess skin or a gap between your abdominal muscles causing you to feel uncomfortable, this should improve.

Most people who have a successful abdominoplasty are more comfortable with their appearance, are able to wear better fitting clothing and their personal and sexual relationships improve.

Are there any alternatives to an abdominoplasty?

If your abdomen looks saggy because the muscles of your abdominal wall are slack, your appearance may improve if you follow an exercise programme.

If the problem is caused mainly by too much fat, it may be better to have only liposuction, where the fat is sucked out using a small tube.

Your surgeon may recommend having liposuction before, during or after an abdominoplasty.

What will happen if I decide not to have the operation?

The appearance of your abdomen will stay the same and any discomfort will continue.

Your surgeon may be able to recommend an alternative to improve the appearance of your abdomen.

An abdominoplasty will not improve your physical health.

What does the operation involve?

The healthcare team will carry out a number of checks to make sure you have the operation you came in for. You can help by confirming to your surgeon and the healthcare team your name and the operation you are having.

The operation is performed under a general anaesthetic and usually takes 2 to 5 hours. You may also have injections of local anaesthetic to help with the pain after the operation. You may be given antibiotics during the operation to reduce the risk of infection.

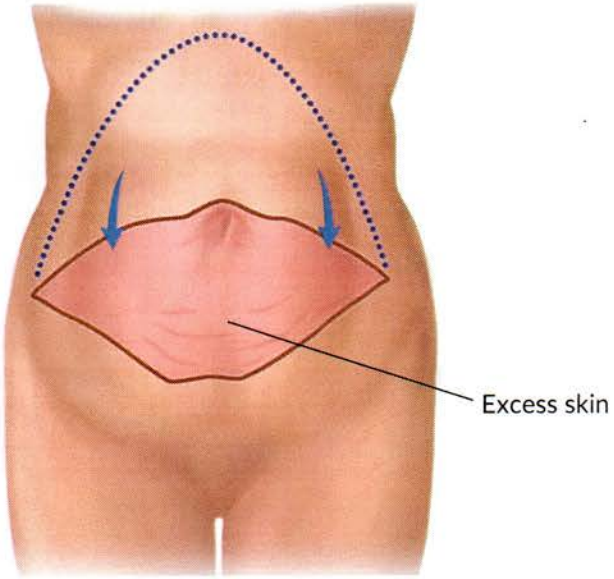
The following are the main techniques that your surgeon may use and they will discuss with you which technique is most appropriate for you.

Standard abdominoplasty

This technique is suitable if you have a lot of excess skin.

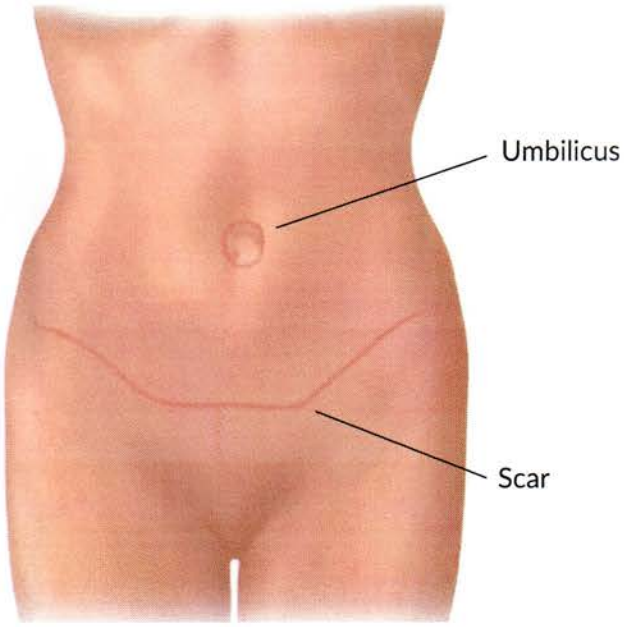
Your surgeon will make a curved cut from one hip to the other, going down to just above your pubic area. They will remove any excess skin and fat between your pubic area and your umbilicus (belly button).

Your surgeon will cut under the skin above your umbilicus, pulling it downwards and tightening it.



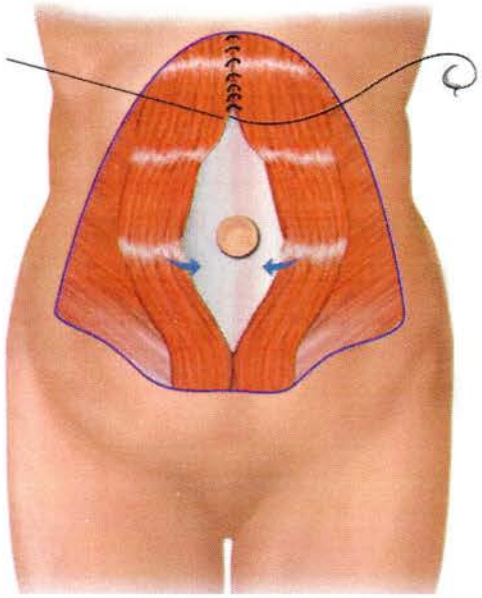
A standard abdominoplasty

Your surgeon will need to make a small circular cut for your umbilicus. Sometimes they will need to reconstruct your umbilicus (umbilicoplasty).



The results of a standard abdominoplasty

Your surgeon may need to tighten the muscles of your abdominal wall and use liposuction to remove excess fat.



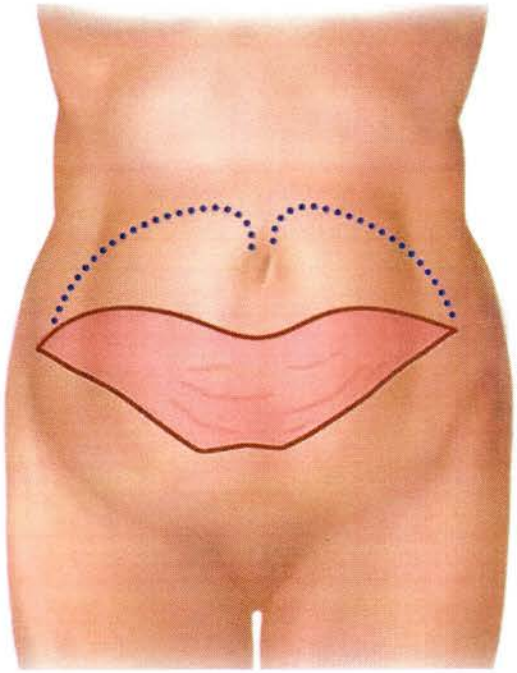
The abdominal muscles being stitched together

Fleur-de-lis abdominoplasty

This technique is suitable if you have a lot of excess skin hanging downwards and around your abdomen, usually as a result of losing a significant amount of weight or having bariatric surgery. The procedure is similar to a standard abdominoplasty. Your surgeon will also tighten your waist by making a vertical cut along your midline up to just below your breast bone, to remove more excess skin and fat.

Mini-abdominoplasty

This technique is suitable if you have only a little excess skin. Your surgeon will need to make only a small cut just above the pubic area to remove the excess skin.



A mini-abdominoplasty

Your surgeon may need to tighten the muscles of your abdominal wall. They will not need to cut under the skin above your umbilicus and will use liposuction only if they need to remove any excess fat.

Lower bodylift or belt lipectomy

These techniques are suitable after significant weight loss, usually as a result of bariatric surgery.

Your surgeon will remove excess skin and fat from your sides, abdomen and lower back. They may also use liposuction to remove excess fat from your thighs.

Endoscopic abdominoplasty

This technique is suitable if you only need to have the muscles of your abdominal wall tightened. Your surgeon will make small cuts and use a flexible telescope (endoscope) with surgical instruments to tighten the muscles of your abdominal wall. Your surgeon may also use liposuction to remove excess fat.

Your surgeon will usually insert drains (tubes) in the cuts to help your wounds to heal. They will usually close the cuts with dissolvable stitches.

What should I do about my medication?

Make sure your healthcare team knows about all the medication you take and follow their advice. This includes all blood-thinning medication as well as herbal and complementary remedies, dietary supplements, and medication you can buy over the counter.

What can I do to help make the operation a success?

If you smoke, stopping smoking now may reduce your risk of developing complications and will improve your long-term health.

Try to maintain a healthy weight. You have a higher risk of developing complications if you are overweight.

Regular exercise should help to prepare you for the operation, help you to recover and improve your long-term health. Before you start exercising, ask the healthcare team or your GP for advice.

You can reduce your risk of infection in a surgical wound.

- In the week before the operation, do not shave or wax the area where a cut is likely to be made.
- Try to have a bath or shower either the day before or on the day of the operation.
- Keep warm around the time of the operation. Let the healthcare team know if you feel cold.

What complications can happen?

The healthcare team will try to reduce the risk of complications.

Any numbers which relate to risk are from studies of people who have had this operation. Your doctor may be able to tell you if the risk of a complication is higher or lower for you.

Some complications can be serious and can even cause death.

You should ask your doctor if there is anything you do not understand.

Your anaesthetist will be able to discuss with you the possible complications of having an anaesthetic.

General complications of any operation

- Pain is usually only mild and easily controlled with simple painkillers such as paracetamol. However, you can feel sore if you had a standard abdominoplasty or if your surgeon had to tighten your abdominal muscles.
- Bleeding during or soon after the operation. Rarely, you will need a blood transfusion or another operation.
- Infection of the surgical site (wound). It is usually safe to shower after 2 days but you should check with the healthcare team. Let the healthcare team know if you get a high temperature, notice pus in your wound, or if your wound becomes red, sore or painful. In a standard abdominoplasty minor infections are common because the central part of your wound is often slow to heal. Any serious infection usually needs treatment with antibiotics or another operation and can make the scar more noticeable.
- Blood clot in your leg (deep-vein thrombosis – DVT). This can cause pain, swelling or redness in your leg, or the veins near the surface of your leg to appear larger than normal. The healthcare team will assess your risk. They will encourage you to get out of bed soon after the operation and may give you injections, medication, or special stockings to wear. Let the healthcare team know straightaway if you think you might have a DVT.
- Blood clot in your lung (pulmonary embolus), if a blood clot moves through your bloodstream to your lungs. Let the healthcare team know straightaway if you become short of breath, feel pain in your chest or upper back, or if you cough up blood. If you are at home, call an ambulance or go immediately to your nearest Emergency department.
- Unsightly scarring of your skin. The scars usually settle with time. If you have dark skin, the scars can sometimes stay thick and red. The scar from the main cut will be noticeable but you will usually be able to hide most of the scar, even when wearing underwear or a swimming costume. If you have a standard abdominoplasty you will also have a scar around your umbilicus. Follow the instructions your surgeon gives you about how to care for your wounds.

Specific complications of this operation

- Developing a collection of blood (haematoma) or fluid (seroma) under the skin in your lower abdomen. You may need to have a small procedure to remove the blood or fluid.
- Numbness or continued pain on your abdomen caused by injury to the small nerves that supply your skin. Any pain or numbness usually gets better within a few weeks but can sometimes continue for many months.
- Wound-healing problems, if some areas do not heal properly or some skin dies. You may need to come back to the clinic often to have the dressings changed. Occasionally you may need further surgery to remove some of the tissue.
- Cosmetic problems. It is difficult to predict exactly how your abdomen will appear after the operation. Sometimes you will still have a small area of excess skin. If you are overweight, particularly on your sides, you may get flaps of skin towards your sides near the ends of your wound. If you had a standard abdominoplasty, your umbilicus may go slightly off-centre but usually only you will notice this. If you had a fleur-de-lis abdominoplasty, your midline scar may thicken and become more noticeable.

How soon will I recover?

In hospital

After the operation you will be transferred to the recovery area and then to the ward. Your abdomen will look discoloured and feel firm and swollen.

Try to keep your knees bent to reduce the tension on your stitches.

You should be able to go home after 2 to 3 days. However, your doctor may recommend that you stay a little longer.

If you are worried about anything, in hospital or at home, contact the healthcare team. They should be able to reassure you or identify and treat any complications.

Returning to normal activities

To reduce the risk of a blood clot, make sure you carefully follow the instructions of the healthcare team if you have been given medication or need to wear special stockings.

Rest for 2 weeks and do only light activities. This will help your wound to heal and reduce the risk of fluid collecting. You should then be able to do a limited amount of activity, such as lifting young children.

Get yourself fitted with a customised corset to help reduce any swelling and to keep you comfortable over the first month.

You should be able to return to work after 2 weeks, depending on your type of work.

Do not lift anything heavy or do strenuous exercise, such as vacuuming or ironing, for 6 weeks.

Do not have sex for 3 weeks and then be gentle.

The healthcare team will advise you on exercising to help keep you to a healthy weight and to improve the tone of your abdominal muscles.

Do not drive until you are confident about controlling your vehicle and always check your insurance policy and with your doctor.

The future

The healthcare team will arrange for you to come back to the clinic regularly to check on your progress.

The results of an abdominoplasty improve gradually over the first 6 months. The best results for you will happen if you keep to a healthy weight and exercise regularly.

If you put on a lot of weight and then lose weight, or become pregnant, you may get too much skin on your abdomen again. However, you should not get as much excess skin as you would have done without the operation.

Summary

An abdominoplasty is an operation to improve the appearance of your abdomen. You should consider the options carefully and have realistic expectations about the results.

Surgery is usually safe and effective but complications can happen. You need to know about them to help you to make an informed decision about surgery. Knowing about them will also help to detect and treat any problems early.

Keep this information document. Use it to help you if you need to talk to the healthcare team.

Acknowledgements
Reviewer: Eoin O'Broin (MD, FRCS (Plast.))
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