

Is there an age limit for patients who want to have plastic surgery?

BY KENDRA Y. MIMS

After years of suffering from back pain due to her overly large breasts, Rita Smith decided it was time for a change. The Ohio resident underwent breast-reduction surgery last year, three days before her 72nd birthday, to alleviate her discomfort. Smith says the procedure – which reduced her breast size from a 42DD to 38C – improved her quality of life, and she adds that she's never felt better. Her only regret is not having the procedure done sooner.

"I developed very large breasts between my sophomore and junior year in high school, and I was tired of having them," says Smith, who contemplated the procedure for years but never went through with it, due to personal obligations and her busy oncology nursing career. "If I had to work a 12-hour nursing shift, it worsened. It's hurt for years and I ignored it. Now I don't have the backache or heaviness. I can return to running. I just feel good."

Smith says she was encouraged to undergo the surgery by a 72-year-old friend who also underwent breast reduction. She says her friend's experience and results inspired her to research the procedure, which included finding a board-certified plastic surgeon. Her research led her to ASPS member Anne Taylor, MD, MPH, and Smith says she was ready to move forward with the procedure immediately following Dr. Taylor's 90-minute consultation.

"Dr. Taylor was very professional and addressed my concerns," Smith says. "I feel 100 percent better. My recovery time has been fine. I haven't slowed down or experienced any problems or any type of pain. My friend told me it was a snap, and it really was easy. I'm healing just fine."

Growing population

Despite undergoing the procedure later in life, Smith says her age never factored into her decision.

"You never see yourself as an older person," she tells *PSN*. "I'm healthy. I have no cardiac issues. I haven't let age stop me at all. If I had to do it all over again, I would."

Smith is not alone in undergoing elective procedures at an older age (nearly 16,000 patients age 55 and older had a mastopexy last year, according to the ASPS 2015 Plastic Surgery Statistics). Studies show that an increasing number of elderly patients have undergone cosmetic procedures in the past decade. According to the ASPS statistics, nearly 4 million cosmetic procedures were performed on patients age 55 and older in 2015, accounting for 26 percent of cosmetic procedures. The top five cosmetic surgical procedures included blepharoplasty (97,800); facelift (82,389); forehead lift (22,456); liposuction (22,760) and dermabrasion (35,054).

"We're living longer," Smith says. "We have more money than we used to. It doesn't matter if we're 80 years old, we still want to look good. Why not? We just want to feel good about ourselves, no matter what other people think."

The Administration on Aging predicts there will be roughly 98 million people age 65 or older in the United States by 2060 – more than twice the number reported in 2014. As a result of the fast growth rate for this age group, the number of cosmetic procedures for elderly patients could continue to rise, which poses the question of whether plastic surgeons should draw a line on performing cosmetic surgery for patients at a certain age.

Age is just a number

ASPS past Ethics Committee Chair and *PSN* Chief Medical Editor Anu Bajaj, MD, says age alone doesn't make someone a poor surgical candidate.

"I don't think we can say there's a definite age in which we can no longer offer elective procedures," she says. "Biological age has no relationship with chronological age. You can see a 65-year-old who's in great shape versus a 40-year-old who may have heart disease and diabetes. My parents are in their 70s and they're both healthy and take care of themselves, whereas I have patients who are 15 years younger – but I don't recommend elective procedures after looking at their medical history; they have so many medical issues and it's not a good situation. You have to look at the patient. You can't just look at the number."

Dr. Taylor, who is a member of the ASPS Patient Safety Subcommittee, believes more elderly patients will undergo cosmetic surgery in the future due to a longer life expectancy.

"People continue to extend their healthy years, and the goal is to live a great, quality life through your 70s, 80s and, perhaps, 90s," she says. "Many in this patient population need other operations, whether it's a knee or hip replacement, so we've learned from reconstructive surgery that we're able to operate on this age group safely. There's nothing inherently unsafe about the cosmetic aspect of it."

Although ASPS member Daniel Kaufman, MD, has performed cosmetic surgery on numerous older patients, he almost turned away an 83-year-old patient who wanted a Mons lift. He admits he initially tried to talk her out of the procedure due to her age, but he eventually had a change of heart.

"She told me, 'I'm just 83 – it doesn't mean I'm dead to the world,'" Dr. Kaufman remembers. "After she said that to me, I reviewed her case and realized she was a healthy lady. She's in shape, active, independent and all her medical issues were under control. Her doctor wrote her a clearance note. She seemed more like a healthy, vibrant 60-year-old. If an 83-year-old patient is healthy and has an active lifestyle, why should I assume she's not in good enough shape to have cosmetic surgery? I initially tried to push her away and find an excuse, but I decided to do it."

Safety precautions

Although ASPS Patient Safety Subcommittee member Warren Ellsworth IV, MD, doesn't let a patient's age preclude him or her from undergoing elective procedures, he says he follows strict guidelines to improve patient safety and outcomes for patients age 50 and older, which includes preoperative testing.

"They have to be reasonably healthy," says Dr. Ellsworth, who requires every patient over age 60 to get a stress test. "I require them to have a clearance from their medical doctor, and if they are on any cardiac medication or high blood pressure medicine, they must have a clearance from their cardiologist. If we can find out if there are any issues with their heart before surgery, we can fix that and optimize their heart's function before surgery to avoid any risks."

"It's not a perfect world. These are lines drawn in the sand that are general guidelines because we're trying to be as safe as possible for cosmetic surgery."

A study published in the *PRS* journal in October 2014 reported that cosmetic proce-

dures in patients age 65 and older, including octogenarians, remain safe, with an acceptable complication rate compared to younger patients. The most common postoperative complications in elderly patients were hematoma, infection and wound-healing. Abdominoplasty was the only procedure associated with higher postoperative complication rates in elderly patients compared to younger patients.

Nevertheless, Dr. Ellsworth concedes he's much more hesitant to agree to perform plastic surgery on elderly patients – especially those who are taking blood-thinning medications.

"As patients get older, we see more and more blood-thinner use," he says. "These medicines are very risky for plastic surgeons, especially when we consider cosmetic procedures such as facelifts in the older population. If an older patient is on a blood thinner, that's a reason for me to get a cardiology consultation – to determine why they're on the blood thinner and if they can be taken off the blood thinner. I have to weigh the risks and benefits to decide if it's appropriate."

Recovery phase

Dr. Ellsworth, who has performed breast reconstructions, facelifts and blepharoplasty procedures on patients ranging from 75-80 years old, notes the recovery period for his elderly patients is longer, especially when general anesthesia is involved. He recommends using local anesthesia or monitored anesthesia care during a facelift procedure to help reduce this patient population's recovery time.

"Some of the anesthetic drugs we use stick around in older people longer than they do in younger people, and that can cause temporary confusion," Dr. Ellsworth explains. "If we can minimize the volatile gases under general anesthesia, then we can limit those risks to our older patients. We just try to safely limit them as much as possible and as much as we can."

Dr. Taylor and Dr. Bajaj also note longer recovery times can be typical among older patients – one of Dr. Taylor's patients in her 70s took twice as long to recover after a tummy tuck – and they both recommend counseling elderly patients about the recovery phase.

"I tell them they'll have a slower recovery," Dr. Bajaj says. "I really encourage them to have good nutritional intake with a high-protein diet before surgery and after surgery. I try to optimize everything I can. I want the things we can control to be perfect."

Patient communication

Effective communication with elderly patients is vital to ensure they receive optimal care and fully understand all information and instructions regarding their surgical procedure. This often requires involving their family doctor or a family member.

"Older patients don't always remember all of their health issues, or you find out the patient is on medication even when they say they're not, so it's important to communicate with their family doctor," Dr. Taylor says, adding there was an occasion in which a patient did not provide her actual age. "She was scheduled for her second facelift and told me she was 78, but she turned out to be 82. Sometimes, they forget things – even their age."

To prevent miscommunication, Dr. Taylor says plastic surgeons need to individualize their form of communication with elderly patients.

"We utilize both video and written communication methods, such as consent forms," she says. "We have them repeat the post-op instructions to make sure they fully understand, because you must ensure they understand all of the instructions, as well as the consent form."

Dr. Ellsworth sees all of his cosmetic patients twice before he agrees to perform their surgery, and he requires his older patients to bring someone with them to their second visit.

"I want to make sure they will have the appropriate assistance and help that's needed after surgery and when they go home, so they need to come back with someone else so they can hear what we have to talk about," he says, adding that family members are ideal. "I think it's vital to have a sounding board there to hear what you have to say and understand the risks, and make sure that everyone is well aware of the plan. I also communicate aggressively with their medical team."

What's best for the patient

Even if there isn't an age that can be marked as "too old" for a cosmetic procedure, Dr. Ellsworth urges plastic surgeons to say no if a situation seems too risky.

"Sometimes it's hard to say no to a patient," he says. "You always want to make them happy, but you're not doing them a favor if you say yes to a surgery that's inappropriate for that patient. Everyone forgets you can say no – including myself – but always keep in mind that no is a reasonable answer. If they're 80 years old and on cardiac medications, cosmetic surgery just may not be the right option for them. The last thing any board-certified ASPS member wants is to end up making someone worse for something as small as a cosmetic breast surgery or a facelift."

Dr. Kaufman says he considers the elderly patient's overall health, medical conditions, lifestyle and social support system when determining whether or not to proceed with an operation. He adds that he declines when it's necessary.

"The key is patient safety," he says. "Personal accountability has to take place for every case that you do. Not a day goes by where I don't look someone in the eye and tell them, 'I'm not the right surgeon for you and I don't think you should do it.' The beauty of doing elective surgery is it's really a case-by-case basis, and every case has to live and die on its own merit."

Although the drawbacks can be harder on elderly patients, Dr. Ellsworth says the benefits of cosmetic surgery go beyond a particular age group.

"Some of my patients have received cosmetic surgery many years ago, and they've not only lived but they've been really pleased with the changes it's brought them in their life, so the benefits of cosmetic surgery should not be limited to just young people," he says.

In addition to advances in medicine, there have also been improvements in surgical and anesthesia techniques that have improved the overall safety of cosmetic surgery throughout the patient population, Dr. Kaufman says.

"Sixty isn't what it used to be," he says. "I don't have an age limit for cosmetic surgery. I have an index of suspicion. We can't pick one single age and then refuse to do anything after that age. It doesn't work like that. We're all on a spectrum. Age is a factor but not the only factor. The number counts, but other things count as well." ■