

Chapter 1

The Ins and Outs of Weight Loss Surgery

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding how weight loss surgery works
 - ▶ Deciding whether surgery is right for you
 - ▶ Preparing for and dealing with the lifestyle changes
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Making the decision to have weight loss surgery is a major commitment to your overall health. It's usually the last resort after years of struggling and trying other methods to lose weight and live a healthier life. Weight loss surgery, also known as *bariatric surgery*, is currently the only treatment available that has been found to be effective as a long-term treatment for morbid obesity. The results after surgery are, for the most part, extraordinary, not only in terms of appearance but also in terms of the improvement or removal of health risks associated with obesity.

If you're considering weight loss surgery, being well informed about the procedure and how your life will change following surgery is essential. The procedure itself is only a tool to assist you in losing weight and modifying your behavior. Success is up to you. After weight loss surgery, you have to be careful about choosing foods wisely, taking your vitamins and supplements regularly, making exercise a part of your daily life, and being certain to follow your doctor's directions. You'll need a support system of family and friends to get through the emotional and physical ups and downs.

With any surgery, risks are involved. Before you decide to have weight loss surgery, you need to understand — and accept — the risks and benefits. For many patients, the risk of death from *not* having the weight loss surgery is greater than the risks of having the procedure itself.



There's no place like thin

My story starts out like many others who suffer from the disease of obesity. I battled a weight problem from the day I was born. When I finally admitted to myself in my late 20s that my "baby fat" was turning into a serious problem, I began dieting earnestly, only to diet my way to morbid obesity.

Over my adult life, I experienced the very common pattern of losing weight, regaining it, and adding a few additional pounds. This cycle continued many times. When my weight reached 264 pounds, and a herniated disk in my back was causing me to face disability, I knew I was in trouble. Although I didn't have the many health problems associated with obesity — such as heart disease, high blood pressure, or diabetes — I felt it was only a matter of time before I would develop them.

I decided to have gastric bypass surgery in January 2000. At that time, there were no books on weight loss surgery, so everything I found out about the surgery came from my own research of medical journals and from other patients.

My recovery from the surgery was fairly routine, even though it was long. The surgery was harder on me than I expected, and it was eight weeks before I felt like I had a spring in my step. I watched as others having the surgery bounced back in two weeks and I was still limping along. That taught me that each person is different in her response to the surgery. The support of my husband after my surgery was very important. My recovery would have been very different were it not for his love and understanding.

My weight loss was slower than many of those I knew, and that worried me. But what I found is that everyone loses at his own pace, and the rate of loss is not always a gauge of how much weight a patient ultimately loses.

Throughout my weight loss journey I have tried to follow four basic principles:

- ✓ At meals, I eat my protein first.
- ✓ I try my best not to graze on foods throughout the day.
- ✓ Water is more important than most realize, so I strive for 64 ounces per day.
- ✓ I exercise — probably the most important yet the most difficult for me!

In 18 months, I went from facing disability to completing a 22-mile bike ride after losing 125 pounds. But as thrilling as that day was, it was just as thrilling the day I stood at the bottom of my stairs and ran to the top and didn't think I was going to die! Being able to do the ordinary things are just as wondrous as the extraordinary things. Being able to tie my shoes, paint my toenails, take a bath (and have water on both sides of me), and shop, shop, shop are a regained blessing. And having this chance to live and thrive is something I don't take for granted. I've been able to reach for a whole new life as an author and a national speaker, something I never would have had the self-esteem to do before my surgery. I am grateful that I found my solution.

Barbara Thompson
Patient, Speaker, and Author

Is Weight Loss Surgery Right for You?

For people who are morbidly obese, trying to lose weight without surgery isn't as effective when it comes to achieving significant long-term weight loss. The majority of morbidly obese people who try to lose weight without having weight loss surgery regain all the weight they've lost over the next five years. Surgical treatment is the only proven method of achieving long-term weight control.

So how do you know if you're morbidly obese? In general, individuals are considered morbidly obese if their weight is more than 100 pounds over their ideal body weight. But a more common way to define morbid obesity is to use the body mass index (BMI).

In Chapter 2, we provide a chart to help you figure out your BMI. If your BMI puts you in the morbidly obese category, you may be a candidate for weight loss surgery. If your weight is lower, but you have other health problems related to obesity; if you've tried to lose weight and failed; and if you're aware of all the risks and rewards of weight loss surgery, weight loss surgery may be the solution for you.

How Does the Surgery Work?

Several types of procedures to achieve weight loss are being done today. These procedures can be divided into three basic categories:

- ✓ **Restrictive procedures**, which limit the amount of food you can eat
- ✓ **Malabsorptive procedures**, which alter your normal digestive process, causing food to be poorly digested and only partially absorbed
- ✓ **A combination of restrictive and malabsorptive**

With restrictive procedures, a portion of the stomach is sectioned off, creating a small pouch for reduced food intake. The pouch usually holds about 1 ounce of food or less, which causes the feeling of fullness after just a few bites. The intestines continue to function normally to absorb nutrients.

A gastric bypass procedure combines restriction and malabsorption by limiting the amount of food that can be consumed and limiting the amount of time that this food can be absorbed by the body. In gastric bypass, the surgeon makes a small pouch from the stomach, bypassing most of the stomach and a part of the small intestines. The small intestines are reattached to the new

smaller pouch. Operations that cause malabsorption and restrict food intake typically produce more weight loss than restrictive procedures, which only decrease food intake.

A malabsorptive procedure like the duodenal switch bypasses most of the small intestines so that much of what you eat is not absorbed. A malabsorptive procedure will result in a greater weight loss but carries with it the greatest possibility of complications and nutritional deficiencies.

In addition to the type of surgery you choose, other factors that influence weight loss are

- ✓ **Your age:** As you age, your metabolism slows. The older you are, the more slowly you'll lose weight.
- ✓ **Your sex:** Because men have a higher percentage of muscle than women, men burn fat and lose weight faster than women.
- ✓ **Your ethnicity:** Some studies suggest that African American women do not lose as much weight as their Caucasian counterparts.
- ✓ **Your weight at the time of the surgery:** Patients who are severely overweight have more to lose and, as a result, drop more pounds. But they may not get as close to their ideal body weight.

What Are the Risks and Benefits?

The most apparent benefit of weight loss surgery is the rapid and more-often-than-not permanent weight loss. Less visible but probably most important are the health improvements that occur from losing the weight. The surgery has been found to be effective in improving and controlling many obesity-related health conditions, including the following:

- ✓ Diabetes
- ✓ High blood pressure
- ✓ Sleep apnea
- ✓ Osteoarthritis
- ✓ Symptoms of gastric reflux disease
- ✓ Infertility
- ✓ Heart disease
- ✓ Respiratory problems
- ✓ High cholesterol and triglycerides
- ✓ Cardiovascular function

Other benefits include more energy, improved self-esteem, as well as improved mobility and comfort.

As with any surgery, however, weight loss surgery is associated with some long-term complications and risks. Risk of death from complications of surgery is less than 1 percent. Depending upon the type of procedure, other possible risks include (but are not limited to) the following:

- ✓ Bleeding
- ✓ Bowel obstruction
- ✓ Cardiac problems
- ✓ Complications due to anesthesia and medications
- ✓ Deep vein thrombosis (DVT)
- ✓ *Dehiscence* (problems with muscle healing)
- ✓ Dehydration
- ✓ *Dumping* (an adverse reaction to eating foods high in fat and sugar)
- ✓ *Esophageal dilation* (an enlargement of the diameter of the esophagus to greater-than-normal size)
- ✓ *Gastric prolapse* (a slippage of the stomach around an adjustable band)

Not the easy way out

The majority of the general public is misinformed about obesity and weight loss surgery. If you're obese, you know what you've been through. Most people have no idea what it's like for you to struggle with obesity — how obesity-related physical problems have affected your daily life; the mental anguish of being treated differently because of your weight and how this destroys your self-esteem; how obesity interferes with all aspects of your life and the never-ending frustration in trying to overcome it.

They also have no understanding of the countless diets you've tried and that, even though you may have lost some weight on those diets, the weight always returned, sometimes with some unwelcome extra pounds. They don't know that the exercise, commercial weight loss programs, and prescription pills you've tried have failed

again and again. They also don't know about the countless hours you've spent researching and investigating this surgery.

You've probably struggled to get insurance coverage, undergone all kinds of medical tests, and endured pain, nausea, and other unpleasant side effects from your surgery. The fact that you've had to change your eating habits and exercise routine also are not accounted for. Having friends, family, and even people who wouldn't talk to you before your surgery treating you differently is also a difficult adjustment. This is all in addition to the emotional and psychological changes you are experiencing.

So the next time someone tells you weight loss surgery is the easy way out, you can tell them exactly how "easy" it is.

- ✓ Gastrointestinal leaks
- ✓ Hernia
- ✓ Infection
- ✓ Iron and vitamin deficiencies
- ✓ *Stricture* (a narrowing of the intestines)
- ✓ Ulcers

Chapter 4 covers the risks of surgery in more detail. But remember: Only you and your doctor can determine whether weight loss surgery is right for you.

Which Surgeon Should You Go To?

The surgeon is the head of your team and will be the team's most important member. You'll want to find an experienced and dedicated surgeon who offers a comprehensive weight loss surgery program — including support personnel and programs to help you with the best preparation before and follow-up care after surgery. (Choosing a surgeon is such an important undertaking that we devote Chapter 5 to the topic.)



The way to find your perfect fit is to shop around. You can get a good feel for a practice by visiting and asking questions. Call the practice and ask if it runs meetings where you can find out more about the surgery. You can get a feel for how the surgeon and her support staff treat you, and you can find answers to your specific questions. Attend not only the informational meetings but support-group meetings as well, because support groups are a vital part of your recovery.

Will Your Surgery Be Covered by Insurance?

The actual process of convincing your insurance company to pay for the procedure may be just as difficult and almost as much work as the procedure itself. Although most insurance companies do pay for weight loss surgery, it sometimes requires a lengthy and complicated approval process. Each company has its own authorization requirements.

Start by calling your insurance carrier and asking if your policy has coverage for weight loss surgery. If your policy excludes coverage for obesity or weight loss, this is different from excluding coverage for morbid obesity — so your policy may still cover weight loss surgery.

Be sure you understand the specifics of your policy and what is required to obtain approval. Most companies require a letter of medical necessity from your obesity surgeon and your primary-care physician. Many carriers also require a nutritional consult and psychological evaluation. Some may refer you to a doctor-supervised diet program before granting approval.

Don't take the first "no" as an answer. Many patients are covered following an appeal.

For more information on insurance, turn to Chapter 6.

What Lifestyle Changes Will You Have to Make?

In order to make the most of your weight loss surgery, you'll need to change your lifestyle after the surgery. Here are some changes you'll need to make:

- ✔ **You'll need to restrict your diet and take supplements.** Because the size of your stomach has effectively been reduced to about the size of 1 cup or less, your meals will be in smaller portions. You'll have to eat more frequently throughout the day, and you'll need to make sure you chew your food slowly and thoroughly, so it doesn't become stuck and so it's properly digested. You'll need more time to eat than you used to, but you'll also notice you feel fuller with less food. You won't drink any beverages with your meal — your stomach will be too small to hold both. If you had gastric bypass or duodenal switch surgery, you'll be absorbing fewer nutrients than you did before the surgery, so to prevent deficiencies, you'll need to commit to a regimen of vitamin supplements for the rest of your life. (Turn to Chapters 10, 11, and 15 for much more information on food, including some great recipes to try every step of the way.)
- ✔ **You'll need to exercise regularly.** You're probably already aware of the benefits of exercise to your overall health and well-being. Exercise is even more important to the weight loss surgery patient. After surgery, you'll be losing weight very rapidly. When this happens, your body will burn stored fat and muscle. Exercise as well as eating more protein are important in countering this by building muscle, burning fat, and increasing your metabolism. Exercise will also be crucial in helping you maintain your weight loss and healthy lifestyle for the long term. (Chapter 16 offers more information on getting into the routine of regular exercise.)
- ✔ **You'll need to work through any psychological and emotional issues.** Many people mistakenly assume that weight loss surgery will be a quick fix to all their problems. You have your own issues going into the surgery, and chances are you'll still have them after surgery. Weight loss surgery

will affect most aspects of your life, including your family, career, social life, and self-esteem. You'll be faced with a lot of changes, most of them good. But any change — good or bad — causes some degree of stress and anxiety. Participating in a support group or getting professional help through counseling will be helpful in overcoming these and the many other challenges that you'll experience along your journey. (Chapter 19 gives you more information on these and other issues you may face after surgery.)

What New and Exciting Experiences Will You Have?

In addition to the health benefits discussed earlier in this chapter, many people find that weight loss surgery has provided them with a tool to improving their overall quality of life. This is a wonderful and motivating gift that will help keep you on track and allow you to experience new and exciting adventures. The following are only a few of the many things you can look forward to:

- ✔ Being able to enjoy life without food being a major focus
- ✔ Feeling good about yourself
- ✔ Having more energy
- ✔ Becoming more active in the lives of your children and grandchildren
- ✔ Shopping for *regular*-sized clothes
- ✔ Crossing your legs
- ✔ Walking up stairs without being short of breath, and walking down the stairs and being able to see the steps in front of you
- ✔ Getting off your medications
- ✔ Fitting in an airplane seat, restaurant booth, and theater chair