

# FOR WOMEN, WEIGHT-LOSS SURGERY MAY RESTORE FERTILITY

By Julie Ellner, MD 5:05 a.m. May 13, 2014

This column is written by experts in the medical field and provides advice on men's and women's health issues.

Studies continue to show that the benefits of weight-loss surgery, also known as bariatric surgery, extend far beyond shedding pounds. It can dramatically improve a variety of serious and life-threatening health conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and sleep apnea.

For women, the surgery can also be life-changing by restoring fertility. Data suggests up to a third of women who struggle with infertility also suffer from obesity, and losing weight has been shown to make it easier to get pregnant.

Many women with obesity have polycystic ovarian syndrome, a condition in which a woman's hormones are out of balance, causing irregular menstrual cycles. The syndrome is caused in part by excess body fat.

After bariatric surgery, however, many women begin having periods regularly for the first time in years. They go on to have healthier pregnancies, with a lower risk of miscarriage, gestational diabetes, birth defects and premature birth.

The American Medical Association recommends that doctors suggest bariatric surgery to patients who have a body mass index, or BMI, that calculates to 35 or higher, and who have been unable to lose weight by dieting. A person's BMI is a ratio between their height and weight.

Bariatric surgery generally reduces the amount of food a person has to eat in order to feel full, and some procedures suppress hunger with a boost in metabolism. Patients who undergo a procedure called gastric bypass generally lose at least 75 percent of excess weight within the first year, with other procedures taking a little longer.

It is extremely important that all patients commit to lifetime follow-up care with their bariatric surgeon to help ensure they stay healthy and keep the weight off.

For women, the lifetime benefits of weight-loss surgery can go beyond improving serious health conditions and restoring fertility. A study published last fall in the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association* showed that women who underwent bariatric surgery had better sexual functioning, an improvement in their reproductive hormone levels, a better quality of life overall and happier marriages.

Researchers have also found that children born to mothers who underwent gastric bypass were genetically different from siblings born before the procedure. A study published last year in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* showed that these children were better guarded against heart disease, had smaller waists and hip girth, lower blood pressure, and better insulin resistance, which protects against diabetes.

An estimated 200,000 bariatric surgeries take place each year in the United States. Women interested in the procedure should attend a free informational seminar provided by a local bariatric surgeon.

The majority of health insurance plans cover bariatric surgery. Women should find out whether there are any restrictions under their coverage. The office staff of many bariatric surgeons will perform this service for their patients at no charge.

*Dr. Julie Ellner is a board-certified surgeon at Sharp Memorial Hospital who specializes in weight-loss surgery.*

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