

# WEST SIDE THE SPIRIT

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## Healthy Manhattan

# Lose the Weight, Gain a Problem

*Meeting a weight loss goal may bring dieters other issues*

By Nate Schweber

Before and after pictures may be the biggest advertising hook for diet products, but what most of them don't show are the challenges dieters face after the weight is off.

Dr. Steven Fallek, a plastic surgeon in Manhattan, has worked with many patients who have shed considerable pounds and their main complaint is the same: too much skin.

"They're not really complaining about anything else," he said.

Fallek said that he often deals with patients who have had gastric bypass surgery and other people who have lost a lot of weight, as much as 80 or 90 pounds. While most health concerns for these people, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol, go away, their skin does not. Skin is elastic, Fallek said, but not that elastic.

"A lot of these patients have a lot of extra skin draped over their body," he said. "They thought they were out of the woods but they

find that their large belly has turned into an apron of extra skin and their legs are rubbing together."

The health risks inherent with such a large amount of skin include rashes and back pain for women, he said. Plus many patients complain that the skin is uncomfortable, he said. Some think it's unsightly, too.

"We're not talking about people who lose 10 pounds over the weekend," he said. "It was Yom Kippur and you're tightening your belt one notch."

Fallek has pioneered a new technique for surgery on people's pubic areas, one of the last spots they deal with after dieting.

"What I found from seeing my own patients was that a lot of times the pubic area was ignored," Fallek said. "By lifting that area up and doing a combination of liposuction and cutting skin off, it will make for a nice rejuvenation of that area."

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## Weight Loss

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The technique is called Pubic Underlining Lift and Liposuction (PULL). The surgery takes around an hour and is less dangerous than genital surgery, he said. Fallek incorporates the pubic area lift during the same operation, and through the same incision, in which he does a standard tummy tuck.

"It's a nice, easy procedure and a way to improve that area," he said. "Before it was something that was really ignored by plastic surgeons as sort of a secondary procedure."

But not all successful dieters are bothered by their excess skin. Upper East Side resident Diane Mastrococco, 50, lost 90 pounds in 16 months between 1986 and 1987. She wears her skin as a badge of honor.

"If I didn't lose all this weight, the skin would still be filled with fat," said Mastrococco, who has kept the weight off for more than 17 years with the help of Weight Watchers. "If I didn't do all that work, I wouldn't have this skin."

Mastrococco said she's never considered surgery to remove some of her excess skin.

"I'm OK with this skin," she said. "It doesn't bother me in the least."

Mastrococco said that she started putting on weight in college, a problem that got worse when she started living on her own in the city after college. Lack of knowledge

about food, coupled with a sedate lifestyle, was the reason she put the weight on, she said.

"When you first live away from home, you know, you can eat whatever you want, plus I was very inactive," she said. "Once you get into this downward spiral, it's almost impossible to stop."

After failing to lose weight after reading several diet books, Mastrococco joined Weight Watchers, which proved to be the formula that helped her reach her goal.

"Now my blood pressure is fabulous, I have no more blood sugar problems, no joint pain and the quality of life is just so much improved," she said. "Now when I go up subway stairs I'm not huffing and puffing and my heart isn't about to burst out of my chest."

She added that losing the weight was essentially like setting down a 90 pound suitcase.

"If I handed you a suitcase that weighed 90 pounds, you couldn't carry it around all day," she said. "I took 90 pounds off my skeleton."

Now a Weight Watchers group leader, Mastrococco said that nobody she has ever seen lose a lot of weight has ever regretted it. While the benefits are increased health and decreased pain, the challenges include excess skin, as well as a psychological shift.

"Inhabiting a whole new body is a whole new can of worms," she said. "Many people in Weight Watchers start to worry about their identity. A lot of people walk around thinking they're still overweight when they're not. To get comfortable in this new body, this new piece of equipment, took me a while." ■