

## HEALTH REPORT

# The New Sex Surgeries

A hot trend out of Hollywood promises to prettify and pleasure up your pantie-clad parts. Could one of these below-the-belt snips, nips, or tucks revolutionize your sex life?

By Carrie Havranek

■ For as long as she can remember, Laura Wolcott\* worried about the size of her inner labia. "My lips were so long and large, they protruded past the outer vaginal folds," explains Wolcott. "My sister teased me. And if I wore anything tight, I had to tuck them in or they'd show through," remembers the 28-year-old graphic designer. "They also rubbed together as I walked and became irritated and red." And sex with her husband was more about ouches than oh-ohs. "Whenever my husband would thrust, the lips would curl in and pinch me."

So Wolcott chose to hop on the latest, most controversial Hollywood plastic-surgery bandwagon: sexual-enhancement surgery. Whether it's for a labial clip, a vaginal nip, or pubic tuck, denizens of Beverly Hills—including some celebrities—are reportedly signing up in droves. Call David Matlock, an L.A.-based surgeon specializing in "laser vaginal rejuvenation" and you'll hear a silky-voiced woman purr, "Laser vaginal rejuvenation empowers women with choice and freedom to enhance sexual gratification." Dr. Matlock claims he's done about 1,000 vaginal-tightening procedures that supposedly can dramatically increase a woman's pleasure during sex. Flip through one of genital cosmetic surgeon Gary Alter's ads and you'll be bombarded with pleas to "take out your hand mirror" and check out those labia—after all, you just might not measure up. For the



**New labia snips:**  
Help for below-the-belt blues

**"My labia were so long, they'd show through my clothes!"**

estimated thousands of women whose lips are too long or asymmetric, a quick surgical trim may be in order.

While this vaginal hard sell has enticed thousands—perhaps tens of thousands—of the genitally dissatisfied to put their privates under the knife, it has alienated many observers of the medical scene. But are these sexual surgeries just a you're-so-vain phenomenon, or can they really help some women have a more fulfilling sex life? Cosmo talked to real women—including one who is a physician herself—who've undergone sexual-enhancement surgery. We found that these procedures, which have

been proved safe and effective in treating certain medical conditions, aren't always as shady or self-indulgent as they might seem. In fact, for the right woman who enlists the right doctor, these radical procedures could actually work wonders. Here, the risks and the possible rewards of the new sex surgeries.

## Lip-o-Suction

After frustrating, getting-nowhere talks with her general physician and OB-GYN, Wolcott called her local medical center, Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles. They referred her to one of two doctors in the United States who are board-certified in both urology and plastic surgery, Gary Alter. Right off the bat, she was impressed by the way he took her labial "quirks" seriously. "By the time many of these women get to me, they're so frustrated," says Dr. Alter. "Doctors have dismissed

\*Some names have been changed.

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their problems as a variation of normal, and the women are very, very upset."

What about a woman's labia could leave her in this much distress? Inner lips so large that they extend well beyond the larger vaginal folds and as much as two inches from the vaginal opening. Since these long lips are constantly compacted in panties, they're splayed out against the larger vaginal folds. All of which is very unlike the norm for most women: lips that are fairly symmetrical, peek out slightly, curve inward, and are somewhat plump.

Every year hundreds of women are so unhappy with their asymmetrical or large lips that they're willing to pay upwards of \$3,000 to have them snipped. Most doctors who perform this lip clip (called a labiaplasty) simply cut the outer section of the lips off. "There's a basic problem with this approach, though," explains Dr. Alter. "When you look at the labia, the outer edge is darker and somewhat ruffled at the end, but as you move inward toward the vagina, you'll see that the lips become lighter and smoother." Cut off the tip and you'll be left with a light, smooth, stitched nub. To shorten while maintaining a more natural look, Dr. Alter removes a chunk from the middle of the labia. The result: The ruffled, curved, darker edge is kept intact, just moved inward. "I think it's really amazing," says Wolcott. "I have no scarring at all. This operation has changed my sexuality, my marriage, and my life. I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

**Reality check:** No other surgeon is yet as experienced in the new labiaplasty as Dr. Alter, and most are completely unaware of its existence. And skill is critical. "With any surgery in that area, you run two major risks: a change in sensation and/or the possibility of overtightening," says Linda T. Bruhaker, M.D., chief of urogynecology and reconstructive pelvic surgery at Rush Medical College in Chicago. The surgery could result in either the lessening of sensation as too much sensitive skin is removed. Or, more ominously, knife strife in that area could disturb a nerve, leaving the tissue associated with it permanently ultrasensitive. The result: Even wearing underwear or



**Pantie pout:** Most women prefer their privates as is.

## Are You Plagued by Labia Envy?

When we polled Cosmo readers on how they feel about their labia, some complained of lips that were too large or too small—but most felt their lips were just right.

- **"I've never worried about the way my labia look. I know men enjoy exploring the diversity of women's vaginas, just as we love to see the many different variations on the penis theme. The last thing I'm thinking when he has his head between my legs is Should I ask him not to look?"**
- **"I've always felt my outer lips are too big, and it makes me self-conscious, though I've never had a lover complain."**
- **"When I watch porn videos with my boyfriend, I do get a little freaked out by how large many of the stars' labia and clitorises are. My inner lips and clitoris are practically invisible. But when I share my insecurities with my guy, he always reassures me that he loves my 'teenie flower.'"**

—NIKKI BELAND

jeans could become uncomfortable—not to mention touches and thrusts. "It's also critical that the surgeon not remove too much tissue when performing the surgery, or the vaginal opening could be made too tight," says Dr. Alter. And with the older-style labiaplasty, you're also almost guaranteed an unnatural look.

Keep in mind, too, since labiaplasty is considered purely cosmetic, you won't see a dime from your insurance company. And recovery isn't a cinch. Afterward, you're swollen and advised to wait six to eight weeks before intercourse.

### Get-a-Grip Vaginal Snip

For Angela Crawford, a 33-year-old physician practicing in Colorado, vaginal tightening was a must for her sagging sex life. "I was out running one day eight years ago and felt a drop down there," she remembers. Her doctor identified her condition as uterine prolapse—a collapse of the uterus into the vagina that's symptomatic of damage or weakness in the pelvic muscles and ligaments. Uterine prolapse is a subset of a greater phenomenon called pelvic prolapse, which affects as many as 20 percent of women at some time in their lives, says Cindy L. Amundsen, M.D., assistant professor in the department of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Texas Medical School at Houston.

In normal women, the muscles that tighten to stop the flow of urination (pubococcygeal, or PC, muscles) support the weight of organs like the uterus and bladder, much the way water supports a ship. There are also ligaments that hold the organs in place, like moorings that tie the ship to the dock. When the PC muscles become damaged (as can happen during childbirth or after lots of heavy physical exertion) or are simply weak (an occurrence in women with nerve damage that hinders the muscles from contracting), the organs can snap free from their ligament moorings and come crashing into the vaginal space, throwing the whole shape and size of the vagina out of whack. Depending on the degree of damage, a woman can experience pelvic prolapse as an undefined vaginal "heaviness," a difficulty holding urine, or—in severe cases—the uterus can actually fall so that the cervix is poking out of the vagina.

Since Crawford's collapse didn't result in incontinence—just in difficulty climaxing and defecating—her doctor refused to operate. "Before 'the fall,' I could

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orgasm very easily during intercourse. I loved sex!" she explains. "Afterward, I couldn't climax at all...I'd always have this sensation that my man needed to be bigger." But as a physician herself, she knew that most doctors would just shrug off that kind of complaint. "Even in the obstetrics community, they don't seem to care about a woman's sexual pleasure—it's all about fertility and childbirth."

Then Crawford saw Dr. Matlock and his Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Center of Los Angeles profiled on a local newsmagazine show. He was pitching procedures that had been developed over decades—and proved safe—to tighten the vaginal musculature in order to cure incontinence. But instead of touting these procedures as pee-stoppers, he sang their praises as sexual saviors. "I was concerned about how much he promoted the cosmetic and overtly sexual aspects of the surgery," Crawford confesses. "I was like, 'Whoa, that's kind of weird.'" But after hearing his point of view in person, she was convinced this kind of surgery could indeed save her sex life.

"How much sexual pleasure you feel is often directly related to the amount of frictional forces generated at the outer third of the vagina—what we call the orgasmic platform," explains Dr. Matlock. Since one side effect of pelvic prolapse is overly relaxed vaginal tissues, part of this orgasmic platform can be extremely loose in women like Crawford. To lasso in this pleasure platform so that it can receive more stimulation, Dr. Matlock lasers small incisions along the top and bottom of the vaginal canal, brings the muscle back together, stitches it in place, and removes excess tissue. The end result: a tighter vaginal grip, which can lead to heightened sensation during masturbation, foreplay, and intercourse. Some women even report more and better orgasms as the G-spot (which is part of this orgasmic platform) is made more accessible. Though she hasn't had sex yet (it's been eight weeks as of this writing), Crawford is thrilled. "It's kind of strange and wonderful: I've never been into masturbation before, but pleasuring myself now is fantastic—and triggers really sensational orgasms."

## Does He Think You're a Labia Loser?

Real men share thoughts on what they like—and don't—down there.

● **"Just like women's breasts, vaginal lips are a turn-on in any shape and size. I know some guys who seem to think that protruding labia are a sign that a woman is super into sex, that she's 'loose.' But that's just ignorant."**

—Scott, 27, stockbroker

● **"One of my girlfriend's inner labia is much longer than the other, but the funny thing is, I never even noticed it until she pointed it out. I think that there are probably a lot of guys out there who don't notice—it's not like one lip being longer than the other is a hindrance or a distraction from what we're doing down there.**

**Do women expect every penis they see to be the same?"**

—Jack, 24, golf instructor

● **"I would guess that few men know an inner labia from an outer labia from a chaise longue. So I don't think men are bothered by labia of different lengths. Unless it were uncomfortable or painful for a woman, she shouldn't make changes because she's afraid of what men will think."**

—Jerry, 29, infomercial producer

● **"I can't say I recall ever seeing a vagina that turned me off. But if a woman had other bad qualities, then maybe a vaginal flaw would be one more thing to single out to convince myself she wasn't a prize package. All in all, length doesn't matter really—as long as everything fits."**

—Adam, 24, Web-site designer

● **"Trust me, if a man is close enough to see the fine details of your labia, the last thing he's likely to do is complain. Men expect each woman's genitals to be different, and it would be pretty boring if they all started looking the same thanks to cosmetic surgery."**

—Ben, 24, paralegal

—MARK DELAND

**Reality check:** While these procedures have been used for women suffering from incontinence, there's no proof they can double your pleasure. "Dr. Matlock has no scientific proof to back up his claim of improvements in terms of sexual pleasure," says Dr. Brubaker. And the procedure is a costly gamble: upwards of \$4,000 and only covered by insurance in cases where it's deemed medically necessary. As with labiaplasty, doctor's orders call for no sex for six to eight weeks. "During the first few days, I felt a lot more pain than I had expected," says Crawford.

## Titillating Tummy Tuck

Kate Shaw, a 28-year-old public relations consultant, had read every book, watched self-help videos, put her boyfriend through frantic foreplay moves, and bored her friends to tears. All to no avail: Shaw just couldn't climax. That is, until she underwent a new variation on the tummy tuck: pubic-mound liposuction. The principle is simple: By removing fat and tightening the skin just above the pubic mound, you pull up tissue that may block access to the clitoris. Just by pushing on this lower tummy area right now, you can feel how the pubic mound and clitoral hood are pulled back and out of the way.

Indeed, after undergoing a \$4,500 procedure in which extra fat was suctioned out just below her belly button, Shaw's sex life completely turned around. "The first time I had sex after the surgery," recalls Shaw, "the experience was better than I could have imagined—I felt so much pleasure radiating from my clitoris. Not only did I have one orgasm, I had a bunch!" And sex has been multiply satisfying ever since.

**Reality check:** The tummy-tuck-clitoris link is purely speculative—no one really *knows* if it works. "If a woman can't have orgasms, I doubt that the reduction of tissue in that area will magically produce them," says Dr. Brubaker. And so again, although tummy tucks are a proven safe and effective procedure, you'd be gambling \$3,000 that a tuck could actually supercharge your sex life. And while recovery is simple, there is a risk of loss of sensation. ■