



**genital surgery**

**your choice**

Labioplasty can improve quality of life and confidence, says Adelaide gynaecologist and pelvic reconstructive surgeon **Dr Oseka Onuma**.

While there are numerous of reasons women seek labioplasty, most women are concerned about both the appearance and discomfort caused by labial elongation.

Labioplasty most commonly involves labial reduction but may also include labial augmentation. Reduction is usually, though not exclusively, carried out on the labia minora, the 'inner lips' on either side of the entrance to the vagina. Labial augmentation is commonly used on the labia majora, the 'outer lips' on either side of the labia minora.

Some women live with the discomfort of elongation for many years and adopt strategies to reduce discomfort such as wearing loose clothing. A significant number of women who come to see me for a labioplasty say they have only recently become aware they can actually have something done to improve their situation.

The number of women who appear to be patronised by the medical community when seeking help is disappointing. Comments that have been reported to me range from 'Only strippers need that' to 'It's all part of being a woman'.

When one considers that seeking help with labial issues is embarrassing to most women, to be treated with such lack of empathy means that many women never seek help for the problem again.

Fortunately the damage done by the medical community in mishandling a patient's request for a labioplasty does not usually result in significant psychological trauma. This is the province of the woman whose partner tells her (in whatever words and with any level of consideration) that her labia looks unsightly, and this interaction is often the factor that makes the woman seek help.

The psychological trauma that ensues most likely results in termination of the relationship and reluctance of the woman to get into another because of fear of rejection and an altered body image.

Cosmetic considerations about the appearance of the labia may have been present in a woman since her early teenage years when she would have noted that she was not the same as her friends. Labia minora elongation is a natural phenomenon, which takes place over time and can be exacerbated subsequent to pregnancy and childbirth.

The woman affected will notice that the length and thickness of the labia have increased. Not uncommonly these changes in length and diameter are accompanied by increased pigmentation, making the labia appear darker and more prominent.

Functional reasons for seeking labial reduction centre on discomfort or pain. Women often complain that when

wearing tight underwear or trousers the labia become uncomfortable as they rub either against each other or against the clothing.

Labial discomfort can prevent some women from taking part in sporting activities such as horse riding or cycling. Some women find that during sexual intercourse the labia fold into the vagina, resulting in friction and pain.

Women with a raised body/mass index tend to have more prominent labia majora than slimmer women. Enlarged labia majora can be a result of excessive fat deposition, excessive skin or a combination of the two. However, fat deposition or excessive skin formation can occur locally in the labia majora for many women.

**Practical considerations**

Women will need to consult with their practitioner about their particular needs and goals for labioplasty. Consultation should involve examination and detailed discussion. Once women are confident in their surgeon and decide to go ahead with labioplasty, the procedure will typically unfold as follows.

Preparation for surgery includes removal of all pubic hair around the labia two to three days prior to surgery. This is because hair getting into a wound can delay healing and increase the risk of infection.

To ensure an aesthetically pleasing result and to avoid any clitoral injury, surgery takes place under general anaesthetic. Labioplasty is typically scheduled as a one-day procedure and patients require pain relief for around three to seven days after surgery. Some bruising may result from the procedure.

**'Part of being a woman is not simply "putting up with it", but taking control by having access to choice'**

After surgery, most patients need to take a minimum of three to four days off work. This will allow for proper healing of the tissues to commence and allow them to wear comfortable loose clothing, reducing any labial discomfort and swelling. A return to sexual or sporting activities should be discussed with their surgeon prior to surgery.

The main risk of labioplasty is wound infection. To assist healing, patients should cleanse with water, avoid astringents and dry by dabbing rather than rubbing.

Labioplasty is an individual consideration. It is not merely the domain of strippers or porn stars. It can improve the physical and psychological quality of life for any woman. It is a procedure which in experienced hands has a good outcome with low risk.

Part of being a woman is not 'putting up with it', but taking control by having access to choice. **acsm**

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