

BODY

THE RISE OF THE QUEST FOR THE “PERFECT” VAGINA

**Labiaplasty is big business. Its fastest growing
market? Teens**

by Sydney Loney

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When Elena Hunter* was sent home post-surgery with 30 tablets of Percocet and 30 Tylenol 3s, her immediate thought was, “Oh my God, just how much pain am I going to be in?”

A lot, as it turned out. But even after vomiting through day two of her post-op and curling her toes and clenching her fists through night three, the 44-year-old from Toronto says the pain is worth it. (She’s on day four.) In fact, she says if she hadn’t discovered there was a cosmetic procedure that would trim away her labia minora, she would have done it herself.

It just shows what some women are willing to go through to obliterate a body part that *no one ever sees*. Labiaplasty is a surgical procedure that reduces the size of the labia (the folds of skin surrounding the vagina) and 12,000 women in the United States had it done last year alone. While there are no official stats in

Canada, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons reported a 40 per cent spike in labiaplasty procedures in 2016. “Female genital surgery is the fastest growing field within cosmetic surgery,” says Dr. Nicole Todd, an OB/GYN at B.C. Women’s Hospital in Vancouver. It’s gotten to the point where every week she has girls under 18 coming to see her because they’re worried about the way their labias look.

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But since when did we start looking down at our labias and thinking, “Nope, that’s gotta go?” Apparently, like trolls and cat videos, it’s just one more thing we can thank the internet for. “Twenty years ago, no one asked about their labias,” says Dr. Jennifer Gunter, the feisty OB/GYN who exposes dubious health practices on her blog *Wielding the Lasso of Truth*. “The trend is being driven by greater access to images online and by surgeons advertising the procedure.” The problem with those images, Todd adds, is that they’re altered—either surgically or with Photoshop. “The images you find online present a narrow view of what a vulva *actually* looks like,” she says.

“Studies show that the more women are exposed to these images, the more they see them as society’s ideal,” Todd says. “The reality is 50 percent of women have labia minora that protrude past the labia majora — it’s perfectly normal.” But tell that to Hunter. “Even as a kid, I felt like something wasn’t right, that my body wasn’t normal down there,” she says. “And when I started using tampons, I remember thinking, ‘why is this in the way?’ I’ve always been self-conscious about it. Always.”

In her 20s, she even had her genitals pierced to draw attention away from “the problem.” Then, she turned to Google, figuring there was a cosmetic surgery for everything else, why not the vagina? Sure enough, she discovered pubis liposuction, clitoral hood reduction and G-spot augmentation, although labiaplasty is by far the most common. Her research eventually lead her to a chair in Dr. Martin

Jugenburg's cosmetic surgery clinic in Toronto, where she held a mirror between her legs while he explained where he was going to cut.

Some women bring in pictures of what they want their new vaginas to look like, but Hunter couldn't decide. "I got so sick of looking at vaginas. What's the right one? Is this one pretty? I didn't know. So, I said, 'Just make my vagina beautiful.'" Jugenburg, who performs two to three labiaplasties a week (his youngest patient is 18, his oldest is 70), says he often has to rein in patients' expectations as he can only work with what they have. He can "reshape and trim" but, he says, it's not magic, it's surgery.

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"People don't know what 'normal' is, he says. "*Playboy*, porn videos — they think *that's* normal, but the truth is there is no standard labia. I've never seen two that looked the same." In June, Swiss researchers published a study in the *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* in which they found that there was so much variation in the 657 vulvas they studied that it was impossible to identify a one-size-fits-all "ideal." So, if there's no such thing as "normal," then what do women want? Jugenburg says it basically comes down to what you see when you stand in front of a mirror. "Some women want nothing to extend past their outer labias," he says. "They don't want to see anything hanging down."

Cosmetic surgery has become so commonplace in our culture—whether you're going up a cup size or two, lifting your butt or filling in the lines on your face—that the underlying message to women today is that there is always going to be something wrong with them that only surgery can fix. (The "contact us" page on the site for the Toronto Cosmetic Surgery Institute, which also offers labiaplasty, says: "What would you like to change about your body?" It would be nice to think that some women type in, "Nothing.") Yet Jugenburg says it's a myth that women have

labiaplasty for other people. “Unlike cosmetic procedures like breast augmentation or Brazilian butt lifts, no one is showing off their labias,” he says. “It’s not about how others see you, it’s about how you see yourself. You’d be surprised how many patients come in with their moms, who are supportive. They’ll say to me, ‘My daughter is like a different person, she feels so much more confident now.’

Hunter says her decision to have a labiaplasty was hers alone. “My boyfriend tells me every day that I’m beautiful and we’ve never had a problem in the bedroom. But it’s just always bothered me.” Sofia Diaz* says the same. The 28-year-old from Calgary is currently saving up the \$5,000 her cosmetic surgeon quoted her during a labiaplasty consultation in February. “While my husband loves me no matter what, I want to love myself, too,” she says.

Diaz first began researching labiaplasties when she was 16. “From the moment I knew the procedure existed, I knew a hundred percent it was what I wanted to do,” she says. “I guess I could say I’ve known from the moment I noticed those suckers floating around in my bathtub when I was around 12 or 13.” She says the way her labia looks bothers her on a daily basis. “I’ve gone my whole life hating that part of my body and now I feel like I can take control of my insecurity and do something about it. I hope to be able to wear a swimsuit next summer without fear of appearing to bulge.”

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Diaz is a member of a labiaplasty support group on Facebook where, in addition to sharing information about plastic surgeons and how long post-operative pain lasts, women recount when they first decided they didn’t like their labias. One woman writes that she felt repulsed by her body when she hit puberty, another says she noticed her labia was “different” when she started dating other girls. Others, like Diaz, note that not only do they feel unattractive,

but physically uncomfortable as well.

“Some women seek labiaplasty because they have symptoms they mistakenly attribute to their labias,” Gunter says. “When those symptoms are addressed, these women typically don’t want surgery anymore.” Labial size doesn’t affect vulvar symptoms or cause yeast infections, she says. Same goes for biking and spin classes, two activities that have been credited for the increased interest in the procedure. Instead of lopping your labia off, Todd suggests wearing bike shorts although, she adds, it is important to protect the labia from irritation during activities like spinning. “Your labia is there for a reason,” she says. “It shields the vagina and protects the opening to the urethra.”

Jugenburg says his harshest critics are OB/GYNs who argue that labiaplasty isn’t a medical procedure. “It’s true, in medicine you don’t want to do anything that’s not medically necessary — and this is not medically necessary,” he says. “But it is cosmetically relevant for the patient. Doctors are missing the point.”

And yet, it’s not a procedure that comes without risks. Although it’s generally done under a local anesthetic (just like going to the dentist, Jugenburg says), there is still a chance of bleeding and infection. And there are a few other things Gunter wants women to know. “The labia minora have specialized nerve endings that enhance sexual pleasure — if you take away some of your labia, you will lose some of these nerves,” she says. The labia also shrinks with age. “The current idea that smaller is better could lead to more women having irreversible symptoms later on, in the same way that breast implants can lead to hardening.”

Another concern is that because labiaplasty is a relatively new procedure, there isn’t a lot of data on the long-term effects. “There is no research to support that it actually improves body image over time,” Todd says. She would like to see more research for how to improve genital self-image and more counselling and resources for women who are considering labiaplasty. “We need to offer more sites that look at normal vulvas so women understand the variety that’s out there,” she says. (For now, she recommends checking out the Great Wall of Vagina and The Labia Library.)

As the fourth day of her surgery comes to a close, Hunter has no desire to look at any more vaginas, not even her own. (“They tell

you not to look down there before your two-week check-up,” she says.) Despite the pain, one of the first things she did after her surgery was shop online for new bra and panty sets. “I spent well over \$500! I can’t remember the last time I bought lingerie for myself.” Although she’s still not able to sit up comfortably and has to “walk like a cowboy,” she’s looking forward to seeing the results. “When this is over, I think I’m going to feel more feminine,” she says. “I think I’m going to feel like a whole new woman.”

**Names have been changed*



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