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You sweat for them. You crunch for them. You even gave up carbs for them. And if none of this works, you might consider surgery for them.

Yes, we're talking about your "abs" — that region that stretches from the top of your pelvis to the bottom of your rib cage. Considering the fact that we tend to keep our abdomens under our shirts throughout most of the day, shouldn't it strike us as a little bit odd that many of us are so obsessed with keeping this part of our body fit? Yet, the fact remains that our society has gone more than a bit crazy, and nearly everyone seems to be on a quest to make their tummies flatter, tighter and trimmer. As this desire has developed, so too have a number of surgical methods that place a slimmer abdomen within reach for nearly anyone willing to bear the pain and expense.

The irony, though, is that even though all of us are trying to achieve the same ideal, slimming surgery is not an aspiration that can be tackled with a one-size-fits-all approach. As Brazil's Dr. Marco Faria Correa notes, surgical techniques vary according to the patient.

THE BEAUTIFUL ABDOMEN

It's hard to turn a corner nowadays without seeing a perfect set of abs. Taut and smooth, the midsections displayed on billboards and in the pages of magazines are epitomes of fitness and sex appeal.

But is it really so simple to define the perfect abdomen? Dr. Marco says it is — and he notes that a veritable symphony of qualities in the muscles, skin and fat determine the beauty of a midsection.

Of these components, the muscles arguably have the most to contribute to a fab set of abs. "A beautiful abdomen must have a midline that defines the abdominal muscles," he says. "For women, they can show just the hint of a six-pack, but this shouldn't be too strong. If you can slightly see a six-pack, this means that they have a very firm set of abdominal muscles, which looks very attractive."

The skin of the perfect abdomen is tight and elastic enough to accentuate these subtle lines and curves. Hanging folds of skin and stretch marks are definite detractors — no big surprise there. However, Dr. Marco notes that there must also remain a small layer of fat beneath the skin in order to promote a natural-looking abdomen.

"The amount of fat in the subcutaneous layer should be between one-half centimetre and two centimetres in thickness," he explains. "Some women like a prominent appearance of strong abdominal muscles, but this is not really ideal. For the

abdomen to be beautiful it must be natural-looking, so in liposuction I always try to keep that layer beneath the skin."

The centrepiece of any abdomen, of course, is the belly button. Dr. Marco notes that for females, the most beautiful belly button is anatomically a bit deep, and it is a long oval shape that lines up vertically with the midline of the abdomen.

But now that we know what an ideal abdomen is supposed to look like, a new question comes to mind — namely, why does everyone want the perfect abdomen?

"I think this is because an attractive abdomen shows how much you care about yourself in terms of your diet and working out," Dr. Marco says. "When you're overweight, the first part of your body that it shows on is your abdomen. It starts coming out like a balloon."

"A beautiful abdomen is a synonym of beauty," he continues. "It's a sign that people care about themselves, love themselves, and care about their appearance."

FOUR SEASONS OF FLAB — WHICH ONE ARE YOU?

Dr. Marco says that in his practice, he routinely deals with four basic types of patients who are in search of abdominal surgery. Here's what he has to say about each particular patient type — and what procedures can best help them achieve their goals.

If you're morbidly obese or significantly overweight...

...slimming surgery may be for you, but only once you're deemed healthy enough

to go under the knife. Dr. Marco notes that dealing with morbidly obese patients can be a dicey matter — particularly since obesity comes part and parcel with a number of other potential diseases and health conditions. Thus, he notes, it is very important that these patients first receive a full medical check-up before discussing the possibility of aesthetic surgery.

"Many times these people have a higher risk for certain complications due to heart disease or high blood pressure," Dr. Marco says. "If they are obese, they are advised to try to lose weight. If the patient is morbidly obese, he or she must go for a treatment like an intragastric balloon or stomach banding in order to lose weight before any surgical slimming procedure."

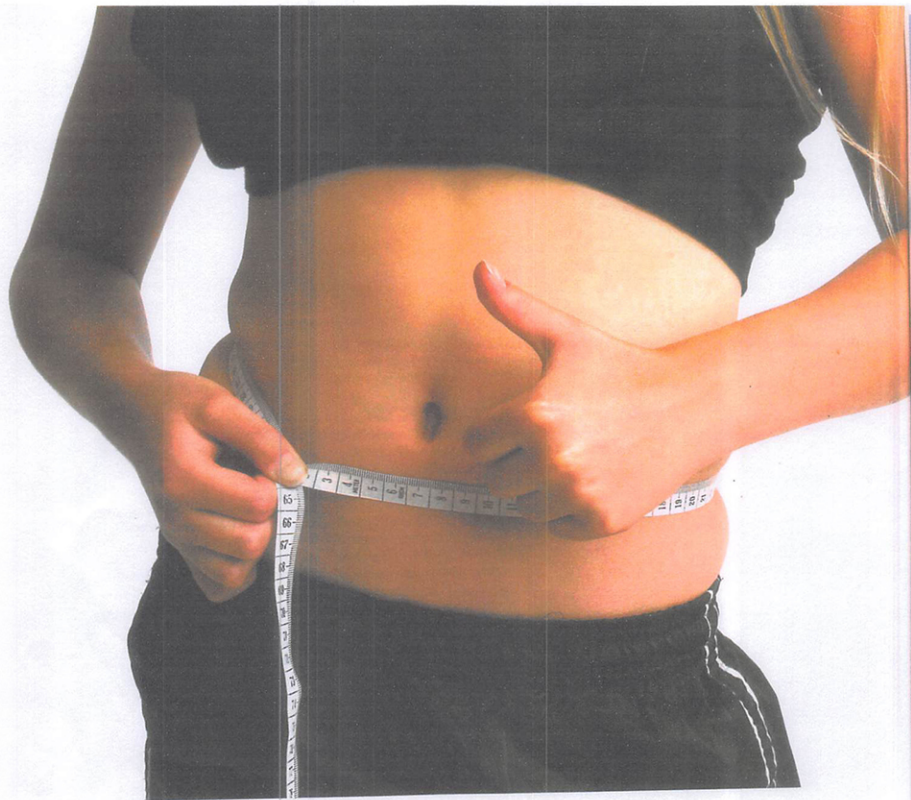
These patients may also be advised to exercise and diet in order to reduce the amount of fat they are carrying in their abdominal area. Once this underlying obesity is treated, however, the result will be folds of stretched, redundant skin. At this point, most patients will need to look at the possibility of an abdominoplasty operation, commonly known as a tummy tuck, in order to get rid of the stretched



Dr. Marco says that in liposuction, fat from lower layer is taken, while fat in superficial layer is preserved to give smooth results.



A male patient with redundant abdominal skin after a gastric bypass. Problem was corrected with a tummy tuck.



Liposuction in the abdomen can be unsafe for women who have been pregnant before, as the muscles that wall off the internal organs may have separated in the course of the pregnancy.

"love handles".

This fact, however, doesn't stop some patients from opting for abdominal liposuction on its own.

"Sometimes they will go and do it anyway," Dr. Marco says. "After this, it will be more difficult to perform the tummy tuck operation, due to fibrosis and other effects. So my best advice is that if the indication is a tummy tuck, please don't go for liposuction; go for a tummy tuck."

Moreover, liposuction in the abdomen can be unsafe for women who have been pregnant before, as the muscles that wall off the internal organs may have separated in the course of the pregnancy. An accidental slip of the cannula between

these muscles could cause a very serious situation.

"An experienced surgeon will palpate the abdomen to see if there is a weak part," Dr. Marco says. "The risk to the patient in well-trained hands is minimal."

THE BOTTOM LINE

As with any other part of the body, an ideal abdomen may require you to shell out. In Singapore, an abdominoplasty procedure can run from S\$14,000 (RM32,200) up to S\$20,000 (RM46,000). Liposuction, in general, is chargeable by area treated. A single area can run S\$4,000 (RM9,200), while other areas can be S\$2,000 (RM4,600) per

area. Those in the market for a full-body lipo job can expect to pay about S\$20,000 (RM46,000).

For many, however, the price tag is well worth the results. While you may not emerge from the operating theatre with the washboard abdomen of a chiselled Greek god, chances are you will see a significant difference. All without crunches or carb-counting, of course. **ESQ**

skin on the abdomen. This type of surgery will not only help their appearance, Dr. Marco says, but it will also help them exercise more easily, and thus have an easier time losing weight.

"When a person has been obese for a long time, they will have a hanging abdomen with skin hanging over the pubis," Dr. Marco explains. "It is possible to do a tummy tuck in obese people if the folds of skin are making it harder for them to start the physical activity they'll need to get slimmer."

Thus, for the obese patient, the road to a trimmer abdomen is really a two-step process – lose the fat, and then get a tummy tuck. Following this operation, liposuction may be used in order to get rid of any remaining pockets of fat.

If you have a loose belly from being pregnant once or twice before...

...liposuction probably isn't the answer. The reason your abdomen is projecting most likely isn't only because of excess fat and skin tissue alone, but also because of a change in your abdominal muscles that occurred during your pregnancy.

"There are those patients who have been pregnant before, in which case you must deal with the underlying muscle," Dr. Marco says. "No matter how much they exercise, no matter how many crunches or sit-ups they do, they cannot remedy the problem. This is because the muscle is not in the right anatomical position."

Specifically, Dr. Marco notes, the problem lies in the position of the two bands of muscle that run vertically down the middle of the torso, which are known as the rectus abdominus muscles. Pre-pregnancy, these muscles meet in the middle to form a solid, unbroken wall of muscle in the front of the abdomen. During pregnancy, however, these muscles are stretched and split apart, leaving a gap in the middle. After a woman gives birth, this gap can remain, leading to a wider, more protruding abdomen.

"This gap can be three, four or even six centimetres wide," Dr. Marco says. "It's a big gap, and it will cause a person to have a projection in their abdomen right in the midline. They will then have a big, bulging, projecting abdomen. We repair that by sewing together the rectus abdominus muscles."

Traditionally, this procedure would be performed through a major, Caesarean-style incision. However, in the past decade, many surgeons have been employing a technique that allows them



A female patient's abdomen after two children - typical observation of loose belly.

to sew these muscles back together with a minimum of incision. This procedure is called the endoscopic tummy tuck. A technique Dr. Marco pioneered 13 years ago, the endoscopic revision involves using a tiny camera mounted on a flexible tube along with miniaturised instruments to perform the procedure of sewing together the rectus abdominus muscles. This creates what can be thought of as an inner-corset, while excess fat is also removed.

Following this revision, the surgeon will likely perform a tummy tuck to eliminate excess skin.

"Because the skin is elastic, as long as there are no stretch marks the skin can usually readjust," Dr. Marco notes.

If you're skinny, but have some excess flabby skin and stretch marks...

...then you, too, might want to consider an abdominoplasty operation. After all, even though you may not be fat, stretched and redundant skin does not discriminate. Any time the skin is stretched too much over a short period of time – such as during childhood growth spurts or changes in weight – stretch marks can occur. In this same way, slender individuals can actually develop some folds of excess skin in the abdominal area.

"In the pubis you will sometimes see some of these folds of skin," Dr. Marco notes. "The abdomen may be a bit hanging, and there may be a lot of stretch marks. In this case, you would do a full tummy tuck in order to resect this big piece of skin."

More petite women may also be interested to know that they are likely more prone to stretch marks than their larger counterparts when pregnancy is concerned.

"Small people, because they gain a significant amount of weight during pregnancy, often have a bad situation with



Patient after endoscopic tummy tuck and conventional tummy tuck to remove excess skin.

stretch marks," Dr. Marco says. Hence, a tummy tuck procedure for these patients is actually a two-in-one operation – shore up the abdominal skin while eliminating unsightly stretch marks.

And because slimmer patients do not have the same overall health concerns as those who are obese, a surgical solution is often closer at hand for these individuals.

"These patients, by and large, can go straight to real cosmetic surgery," Dr. Marco says. "You can get nice definition of the midline, and if you have nice muscle tone, you'll have a very flat abdomen."



A skinny patient with stretchmarks.



Patient after full tummy tuck.



Even though you may not be fat, stretched and redundant skin does not discriminate. Any time the skin is stretched too much over a short period of time – stretch marks can occur.

If you just have some extra pockets of fat here and there...

...you can probably benefit from some liposuction in these areas. As long as the skin on your abdomen has still maintained its elasticity, it will be able to accommodate the change.

"If a patient has not had any babies, their muscles are still okay," Dr. Marco says. "But if they have a bit of fat accumulation, then you can proceed with liposuction. If the patient only has a small amount of abdominal lipodystrophy – that is, if they have some unwanted fat distributed in their abdomen – in those cases just by using liposuction we can shape the body with no open surgery."

However, it is important for these patients to remember to consult a trained specialist surgeon when it comes to getting this operation performed. After all, liposuction isn't just about sucking out as much fat as possible. In many ways it is about sculpting the body for a smooth and natural appearance.

"There are two layers of fat," Dr. Marco explains. "In liposuction we take fat from the lower layer, and we preserve the superficial layer. This gives us a smooth result."

In some patients, an abdominoplasty operation may still be needed. Once again, the best way to determine whether this type of surgery is needed is to con-



Example of female patient with extra pockets of fat here and there, who benefited from liposuction in those areas.

sult the opinions of one or more qualified plastic surgeons. These experts are trained to present you with all of your options when it comes to surgery – and even when it comes to modest changes in lifestyle.

"If a patient is just 10 kilograms overweight, we will tell them to diet first," Dr. Marco says. "Then we will take a look and do a tummy tuck, if necessary."

THE DANGERS OF GOING FOR THE WRONG PROCEDURE

Sure, you might be thinking that to get rid of that gut, liposuction is the perfect solution. However, abdominal liposuction is a far cry from a cure-all when it comes to reducing your girth. After all, there are other procedures out there. Most importantly, making the wrong call on which procedure to have done can have huge implications for your appearance – as well as your health.

"Frequently, people go for abdominal liposuction after having a few babies, then the result is even worse," Dr. Marco says. "You end up creating more flabbiness. This is because if you already have a bit of flabby skin, if you just remove the fat under the skin, the flabbiness becomes even worse."

For this reason, Dr. Marco notes, simple abdominal liposuction is not often indicated as a standalone treatment. In fact, the best situation in which liposuction can be used alone in the abdomen is if there are only a few areas of fatty tissue to be removed – for example, if the patient has a stubborn "spare tyre" or