

Published by the Scarsdale [New York] Inquirer, January 20, 2000.

Nasal Beauty: Form and Function

By Minas Constantinides, M.D.

The primary goal of today's nasal surgeon is to provide a nose that balances the rest of the face and, if needed, functions better.

Cosmetic nasal surgery, once limited to teenage girls wanting to rid themselves of Daddy's nose, is now among the most popular cosmetic operations for men and women in their 20's, 30's, and early 40's. Approximately 100,000 rhinoplasties were performed in 1998 in the United States.

Rhinoplasty today has become more predictable and safe. A competent, well-trained surgeon should be able to deliver a good cosmetic result with minimal risks. Nevertheless, problems may occur, and prospective patients should be aware of them.

Rhinoplasty is by far the most complex of facial cosmetic procedures. The nose is a strong central feature. It balances the face, providing a sweeping curve from eyebrow and forehead to upper lip. If too dominant, it demands too much attention, detracting from the beauty of the eyes. If too petite, it can make our entire face appear infantile. The nose must not only provide harmony to our other features, but must function as an organ of smell and touch. Since most of taste is dependent on smell, it fully or partly participates in three of our five senses.

A proper balance

The primary goal of today's nasal surgeon is to provide a nose that balances the rest of the face and, if needed, functions better. Problems occur when the surgeon is too heavy-handed in reducing nasal size, or is inattentive when ensuring that the upper third, middle third, and lower third of the nose are balanced. The "ski slope" deformity results from over-reducing the top of the nose, so not only is it too low, but the tip remains too prominent. This tip may rotate upwards, sometimes so much that one can look all the way into each nostril.

Changes must leave the nose stronger than before surgery. If the nose is weakened, several problems occur. During the healing process, the cartilage may bend or warp,

causing new deviations. The sidewalls, which in the middle third of the nose are cartilage and function as regulators of airflow, may collapse, causing new or worse obstruction. The tip, also cartilage, may knuckle or pinch, making the nose look unnatural, operated upon, and also cause obstruction.

Improving nasal obstruction is an important reason that many patients seek out nasal surgery. Sometimes obstruction is caused by deviations of the septum, the central panel of cartilage and bone that divides one nasal passage from the other. Sometimes the internal structures responsible for humidifying, filtering, and warming the air we breathe are enlarged. The sidewalls of the nose may be weak. Correcting these problems surgically is recommended when the problem significantly impacts one's life and can not be controlled with medication.

A successful rhinoplasty surgeon identifies what changes will improve the esthetics and function of the nose. Experience allows the surgeon to predict what the long-term impact is of every maneuver he makes. The biggest challenge in rhinoplasty is not to decide what to do, but to predict whether what is done will affect another part of the nose immediately and in the long term. Unanticipated changes are main reasons for revision rhinoplasty surgery.

Functional problems may be reimbursable by insurance. Generally, any changes in the appearance of the nose not attributable to an injury are not covered. Nevertheless, in this time of decreasing physician fees by HMO's, many surgeons are turning to cosmetic surgery to augment their incomes. The buyer, in this the patient, must beware and carefully assess a doctor's ability to deliver a successful aesthetic and functional result with minimal risk.

Selecting the right surgeon is difficult. How can you tell whether or not he or she will share your goals, and how do you know the doctor can deliver the promised result? These are common concerns for anyone considering cosmetic surgery. Here are some practical guidelines:

Selecting a surgeon

1. Choose an experienced surgeon certified by the American Board of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery or the American Board of Otolaryngology. A third board, the American Board of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, is an equivalent board based on court decisions in several states where its status has been challenged. Being board-certified, however, is not enough. A surgeon must be experienced in rhinoplasty to be talented in it. A good rule of thumb is to choose a surgeon who has performed more than 100 rhinoplasties and who continues to perform more than 25 a year.

2. Choose a surgeon who has proven his worth. Ask a friend who had rhinoplasty for a recommendation.
3. Choose a surgeon who you feel comfortable with, who listens to you and shares your goals. Do not assume that just because the surgeon has a good reputation he or she will be the right surgeon for you.
4. Ask to see pictures. Carefully examine the surgeon's postoperative results. If you don't care for them, walk away.
5. Beware of imposters. Politely ask for their credentials, board certifications, revision rates (how often they have to go back and redo one of their results), complication rates, and training. Do not be embarrassed to ask questions: honest questions and honest answers will help to build a confident relationship.

The best surgeon will answer your questions, allay your fears, reassure you, and provide a result that will give lasting improvement in both nasal shape and function.

Rhinoplasty today is a reliable procedure that will improve the look of your face. If your nose has bothered you, schedule a consultation to discuss the possibilities and advances in our understanding of nasal form and function. By exercising good judgement in selecting your surgeon, you will be rewarded with a nose that looks and works great.

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