

Mommy makeovers: How some women are reversing the physical toll of having kids

Combination surgery of tummy tuck and breast lift can cost up to \$24,000, but many moms say it's worth the price tag — and the judgment

By Elizabeth Withey, Edmonton Journal October 27, 2013



Heather Zavisha got a “mommy makeover” done this year in Mexico. The combination plastic surgery of tummy tuck and breast lift, which some women undergo to get their bodies back to a pre-pregnancy state, can cost as much as \$24,000 in Canada.

Photograph by: Shaughn Butts , Edmonton Journal

EDMONTON - A young doctor in a slim-fit navy micro-check suit opens the front of Jenna Ferretti's papery medical top and examines her breasts.

"Definitely there is quite a bit of drooping," plastic surgeon Dr. Feng Chong says to Ferretti, nodding his head. "Your nipple is well beneath the fold."

We are in a stylish examining room in a medical office on 124th Street. The floor is black tile, the walls a soothing neutral brown. It is a crisp autumn morning. Ferretti, a mother of two, has waited several months for a consultation with Chong, one of just a handful of plastic surgeons in the city who specialize in "mommy makeovers." The alliteratively named cosmetic procedure offers a combination of breast lift, breast augmentation, tummy tuck and/or liposuction that reverses some of the physical tolls of pregnancy and breastfeeding. Mommy makeovers are not covered by the provincial health care plan, and they're not cheap: at Chong's clinic, a woman will pay anywhere from \$9,000 to \$24,000, depending on how much "work" she has done.

With her five-year-old, Julian, distracted by a hunting game on her smartphone, Ferretti gives the doctor some backstory on how having babies has changed her figure. Her cup size has gone from a double-A to a D, and "gravity's kinda taking hold," she jokes.

Chong explains how the sag of a woman's breasts is graded on a scale of one to three, three being the saggiest. "Unfortunately yours are the most severe," he says, then goes over a hand-drawn diagram of how a breast lift works.

Ferretti, 36, wants to have surgery to fix her breasts and her belly. She unzips the fly of her jeans to show Chong a deep, dimple-like scar above her navel, the result of multiple laparotomies and keyhole surgeries. A tummy tuck will remove excess skin and get rid of that scar, though it will also create a new scar running across her lower abdomen from hip to hip.

Ferretti is OK with that. She's going to pay for the mommy makeover with savings. The surgery isn't about vanity. It's about self-esteem.

“I want to feel good about myself,” she says. “I’ve put the kids first for so long, and now it’s my turn.” She is divorced and wants to start dating again, but right now the thought of being intimate with a new man makes her cringe. “You know what, it’s lights off. I’m completely embarrassed.”

Mommy makeovers are increasingly commonplace among ordinary women who have finished having children and can afford the hefty price tag. Neither Canada nor Alberta keeps statistics on cosmetic surgery procedures, since they are largely a private service, but the United States does track these numbers. A 2011 study by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons showed that women had nearly 112,000 tummy tucks and 90,000 breast lifts in 2010, an increase of 85 per cent and 70 per cent respectively from 10 years earlier. It’s in part because the procedures are more socially acceptable than 10 years ago, the organization reported. And women are getting mommy makeover procedures younger — in their 30s, rather than their 50s. Breast augmentation has been the top cosmetic surgical procedure in the U.S. since 2006, the organization reported. (This doesn’t include minimally invasive facial rejuvenation procedures like Botox. A staggering 6.1 million Botox injections were performed in the U.S. in 2012).

In Edmonton, potential clients wait months to get a consult with Chong, who performs up to 10 surgeries each week. Most of his patients are in their 30s and 40s.

“It’s a lot of money but on the flip side, what a lot of women tell me, what I hear more and more is, ‘I’ve spent so much of my effort and money taking care of my kids, now it’s time to take care of myself,’” Chong says. “They say things like, ‘I could go buy a new car but I’d rather invest it in myself.’”



Edmonton plastic surgeon Dr. Feng Chong uses diagrams to explain both the tummy tuck and breast lift procedures to patient Jenna Ferretti during a consultation.

Photograph by: Elizabeth Withey, Edmonton Journal

Chantelle Leclair had gestational diabetes during both her pregnancies, gaining 80 pounds each time. Leclair, who runs a crossfit studio, managed to lose the extra weight both times, but barely recognized her body afterwards. “There was this big pooch of skin on my stomach,” Leclair recalls, “and my breasts were like socks with bowling balls in them.” Without a bra, “the skin was hanging there with no structure in it. And the more weight I lost, the more the excessive skin became prevalent.”

Leclair felt “grossed out” whenever she’d bend forward and feel things hanging and find herself tucking in skin. “It’s a really uncomfortable thing to have this disfigurement going on.”

In January 2013, she got a mommy makeover with Chong for \$24,000. “People say, ‘your boobs look the same as before,’ and in clothes they absolutely do,” Leclair says. “It wasn’t my goal to turn my body into the body of a 23-year-old woman who hasn’t had kids.”

The procedure isn’t without its drawbacks. There’s a long recovery period, and scars too. Leclair’s scars run around the circumference of her nipples, and running from the base of each nipple down under the bottom of her breasts, and a hip-to-hip scar across her lower abdomen.

But it was worth it to her. “I feel comfortable back in my own skin. I don’t have those moments where I look at my body in a mirror, catch myself in a certain position if I didn’t have everything tied in and have that sense of ‘YECH.’ ”

Some women go abroad to take advantage of lower priced surgeries. Prices in Edmonton tend to be steeper than those in the United States and Mexico. In June 2013, Heather Zavisha got a full mommy makeover at a private clinic in Tijuana for \$15,000 including airfare and accommodation. The 28-year-old had a consult with an Edmonton surgeon but he wanted to charge more and do the surgeries separately. Friends recommended a Mexican surgeon; Zavisha went to Tijuana for eight days and got the full-meal deal. “If I’d have done it on my own, I’d have been like, oh Mexico, ew, dirty, but that place is cleaner than any hospital I’ve been in here,” she says of the Limarp clinic where she had her surgery.

“It has made me a happier person, for sure,” Zavisha says. She doesn’t need to wear a bra and isn’t afraid to wear bikinis or strapless clothes. “I’m more outgoing. I don’t sit behind a table, for sure, I’ll stand up and talk to everyone. It’s something I’ve wanted for five years and now that I have it, I’m like, yay!”

“TREAT YOURSELF TO A MOMMY MAKEOVER TODAY! YOU DESERVE IT,” it says on Chong’s website, www.plasticsurgeryalberta.ca. The website is elegant, simple, the models in the photos are youthful and feminine. “Safe surgical procedures can

be performed to help mothers regain their pre-pregnancy bodies, and to help them feel more attractive, confident, and comfortable.”

Chong clarifies, however, that he won't do surgery on everyone who comes into the clinic. He has had to turn some women away because they have unrealistic expectations. For example, some women want liposuction when they are already thin and healthy. He also turns away women who want to take a shortcut, “as in, let's get a tummy tuck as a weight loss procedure,” he explains. Mommy makeovers are meant to correct things that “can't be reversed with exercise and diet. It's not an alternative to a healthy lifestyle, a healthy diet and so on.”

Because Chong can improve aspects of the body that a woman can't correct on her own, the work is as rewarding as it is lucrative.

“The first two weeks they don't like me very much because of the pain,” Chong says, but afterwards, “they're extremely happy. Women come and want to give me a hug. ‘You changed my life.’ A lot of women say, they wished they'd done it earlier. ‘I was afraid, afraid of the recovery, I thought I was being selfish.’ ”

Despite the positive outcomes, every surgery carries risk. With mommy makeovers there is always a small chance of infection, bleeding, blood clots and reduced sensation, Chong explains, as well as the risks associated with being under general anesthetic. Liposuction, which can be part of a mommy makeover, carries another risk: fat embolism, in which fat globules get into the blood vessels. It can be deadly. In 2008, Ashish Toews, a Calgary mom of two, died of a fat embolism while getting lipo. She was 33.

There are no long-term side effects to the cosmetic surgeries involved in a mommy makeover, Chong says, citing studies, although breast implants might need to be replaced after a period of 10 years or more.

The main issue is that a woman shouldn't invest in a mommy makeover until she's certain her child-bearing days are done. The bodily changes of pregnancy and breastfeeding can effectively undo the results of the surgery, meaning a woman

who has had the surgery might need to go under the knife again to get that pre-baby figure she desires. Also, a woman who breastfeeds after a breast lift may have a reduced milk supply, Chong says.

While the medical risks may be low, there are many who firmly believe mothers ought to celebrate their postpartum bodies — stretch marks, love handles, sagging and all. These are maternal war wounds, they argue, physical changes not worth losing sleep over and certainly not something to “correct” with a scalpel and a line of credit.

“For some women, it’s a badge of honour,” says Tara-Leigh McHugh, a body image expert at the University of Alberta. “Some women just don’t care.”

To label a mommy makeover as good or bad isn’t possible because body image is incredibly complex, McHugh explains. “I might feel really good about myself because of relationships, my role as a mother, whatever. Maybe other women, how they feel about themselves may be very appearance-based. There’s no correct answer.”

McHugh knows the toll pregnancy and childbirth take on the body, and she can sympathize with women who decide to go the surgery route.

“I’m a mom of three children under five and even as a body image researcher I’ve thought a lot about it,” she says. “Women have a big challenge on their hands. Whether they’ve had babies or not, they face society-imposed expectations about how they’re supposed to look.”

Jade Beall is trying to change the perceptions about mothers’ bodies — one photo shoot at a time. For the past five years, the Tuscon, Ariz., native has been helping empower women of all ages and body types with “truthful” photography. When she had her own baby in early 2012, Beale’s artistic focus, quite naturally, shifted to the postpartum physique. She herself had gained 50 pounds during pregnancy and was struggling to lose the excess weight. “My body was really altered,” she

recalls. “That was a source of sadness. But it was also empowering. I was amazed by my body, too, by this process of giving birth. ‘I am so badass!’ ”

Beall went into her photo studio and did a tastefully nude photo shoot of herself and baby Sequoia, then posted the pictures to her website. It wasn’t her best moment. “I wasn’t elated. I had to push myself,” she says, noting she has had body image issues since she suffered extreme acne as a teen. “It was like, awesome, I’m going to show myself at an all-time low.

“And yet I really wanted that variety on my website.”

The response was overwhelming; hundreds of emails came flooding in commending Beall on her beauty and bravery. “I had no idea they would be so well-received. People were, I guess, ready to receive them.”

That’s when Beall decided to make A Beautiful Body Project, a website dedicated to postpartum photography that has garnered a huge flurry of media attention and online interest. The first shoot was of a mom with “amazing stretch marks” whose children are snuggling up to her belly. The Facebook response was incredible, with many telling Beall they’d never even seen such a photo before.

“It’s beautiful to see myself in this,” Doris Palmeros wrote.

“I’ve got tears streaming down my face. My daughters love to play with Mommy’s big soft belly they grew in. Thanks for the reality check!” Nat Di said. “I was shocked that people were shocked, that people felt they were the only ones who had it (this type of belly),” Beall says.

A Beautiful Body Project has grown to include photos of 100 women’s postpartum bodies. “It’s just getting better and better. Just when I think we’re at the peak of sisterhood and awesomeness, it gets even juicier.” Since it launched, the website has had more than a million unique viewers and Beall gets requests from all over the world from women who want her to photograph their bodies, too. “It’s beautiful to see women united in this form, wanting to share and create art and

share stories. I hope this platform does take off, become a place where both men and women like to share this truthful imagery and art.”

The Guardian called her up after Kate Middleton gave birth to Prince George, asking for her opinion on Kate’s appearance outside the hospital wearing an empire-waisted dress that made no effort to hide her post-baby belly. “I was a little shocked. ‘Really? You want my take on this?’ I was honoured. It was an amazing turning point for women, having her standing there in her gorgeous body. ‘OK, Kate Middleton, come on, let’s do a shoot, girl!’ I’m dreaming.”

A book of Beall’s photography featuring portraits of between 50 to 70 mothers will be out in February 2014. Beall calls it the first volume, because she’s already got other plans for subsequent shoots celebrating women’s bodies on themes other than motherhood.

But while she’s all in favour of celebrating the natural, she isn’t against women who’ve had surgery to fix their tummies and breasts after babies. “I really want to be all-inclusive,” she says. “I’m all for whatever makes you feel empowered, if that’s truly going to bring you happiness. I will not condemn. I want to be a support to all my sisters.”

It does sadden her, though, when women think they ought to have a mommy makeover to be truly beautiful. “Ugh, ugh, it hurts me,” she says. “It hurts my soul. I think a lot of people make a lot of money when we agree on that. It hurts my heart. I don’t think we need to surgically remove or alter anything in most cases.”

Yet not everyone follows Beall’s lead and withholds judgment. Many women who’ve undergone cosmetic surgery face negative reactions from relatives, friends and coworkers.

Zavisha lost a friend on Facebook after she wrote testimonial about mommy makeovers online, saying how she loved her kids but they’d “damaged” her body.

“My friend said I should walk around with stretch marks and excess skin with pride, because my kids gave them to me. My opinion is, if you can fix it, why not?”

Leclair, 36, has faced her share of criticism, too. When she said jokingly she could no longer afford to send both her kids to university, some people didn't laugh. Women have called her selfish and said she's making other women feel pressured to make their bodies live up to an ideal that isn't realistic.

“I find it extremely difficult when people tell me my individual choices are responsible for the decimation of women's rights. It's such a huge leap, but I've certainly heard it. I did it for my own personal preference. I don't think it impacts anyone but me. I don't walk around naked around other people's husbands and say, 'Ha ha, make your wife look like this!' ”

“It's an individual choice,” says Chong. “We spend thousands on gym memberships, diets, supplements, eating well. I can't fault a woman who says, I've worked hard, I'm fit and healthy and I want to look better.

“I've had some women tell me, 'my neighbours gave me a hard time.' I don't think that's necessarily fair. You shouldn't get upset at someone, or think they're shallow or vain, for wanting to feel more confident about themselves.”

Ferretti doesn't care what people think. She's looking forward to perkier breasts and a smoother, slimmer midriff. “If I want to look better to go out and date, I think I deserve to do that.”

ewithey@edmontonjournal.com

twitter.com/lizwithey

plasticsurgeryalberta.ca