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## More Than Just a "Nip and Tuck"

*As recent headlines have reminded us, cosmetic surgery is serious business. How to find a competent plastic surgeon (suitable for a woman of color) and minimize your risks.*

The death of Kanye West's mother, Dr. Donda West, in November following liposuction, a breast reduction, and a tummy tuck was a tragic reminder that plastic surgery is real surgery, despite the proliferation of makeover shows on TV depicting one-hour surgery and recovery. "There are very few deaths caused by plastic surgery," says **Emily Pollard, M.D.**, a board-certified plastic surgeon in Philadelphia. "But we always have to do better to increase our vigilance and safety."

**If you are considering cosmetic surgery, here are steps you can take to lower risk of complications:**

### Find Out Your Fitness

Whether you are a good candidate for surgery depends on what work you want. For example, having breast and stomach surgery at the same time (often called a mommy makeover), as Dr. West did, is safer for some women than others, with the woman's overall health often more important than her age.

Different procedures are also more likely to yield the desired results for certain people, so your doctor must assess you carefully. Anyone over 50 will usually be required to have preoperative testing--including blood work, chest X-rays, and an EKG--before undergoing any procedure, **Dr. Pollard** says. Some doctors also insist on it for younger patients.

Be sure to disclose every detail of your medical history--along with all prescription and over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, herbs, and nutritional supplements you take. Also follow your physician's preoperative instructions, including stopping smoking.

### Take the Surgeon Search Seriously

More so than in other medical fields, finding a good cosmetic surgeon means doing a lot of homework. "Particularly in the aesthetic or cosmetic form of plastic surgery, we're seeing a tremendous influx of people who are not properly trained to do what they are advertising," says Louis Wyatt, M.D., a board-eligible plastic surgeon in Los Angeles.

That's because doctors educated in other disciplines are switching to cosmetic surgery, a growing field where

many patients pay out of pocket, allowing doctors to avoid insurance hassles and astronomical malpractice-insurance costs. Consequently, many doctors calling themselves plastic surgeons have had far less than the traditional six to seven years of training--some may not even have surgical training at all. In many states this is perfectly legal.

Drs. **Pollard** and Wyatt recommend that patients look for these qualifications while researching and interviewing doctors:

- **Board certification:** Although certification is voluntary, don't settle for less than a doctor who is board-eligible or--the gold standard in physician credentialing--board-certified, and only by a member board of the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS). Newer board-granting organizations not recognized by the ABMS have been created to certify doctors with less training.
- **Relevant training:** The doctor's board certification should be in plastic surgery itself, ophthalmology (eye), or otolaryngology (ear, nose, and throat).
- **FACS credentials:** The doctor's name should be followed by the acronym FACS, short for Fellow of the American College of Surgeons
- **Referrals:** Ask satisfied friends who have had surgery, your family doctor, and the plastic surgery departments of local hospitals whom they recommend. You can also consult the Referral Service of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons or the Find-a-Surgeon Database the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. (Both of these societies are recognized by a member board of the ABMS.) Once you've identified a qualified doctor, ask to speak to a patient of the surgeon's who has had the same procedure you're planning to have.
- **Expertise:** Your doctor should perform the procedure you're having at least once a month--more often is ideal. For comparison, call a larger local hospital or surgical center to find out how often an expert there performs your procedure.

- **Knowledge of skin of color:** Operating on skin of color can require special planning, instruments, and tender loving care. Ask if your skin presents any special concerns—keloid scarring, for instance—and how the doctor will address them.
- **Surgical support:** A nurse anesthetist or anesthesiologist should be in the operating room to look after you during your procedure.
- **Proper licensing:** In some parts of the country, plastic surgery is performed in office-based facilities or surgical centers. Search for a site approved by the American Association for Accreditation of Ambulatory Surgery Facilities to ensure that a center's equipment, operating room, personnel, and surgeons are topnotch.
- **A plan B:** Your doctor should be prepared to handle complications, whether a glitch with a stitch or respiratory issues. If the surgery is being performed in a center, it should have a relationship with a major nearby hospital so that you can be immediately-transported there.

### Give Your Doctor a Checkup

Spend \$10 to obtain your doctor's educational and licensing history, medical specialty, and any disciplinary sanctions from the Federation of State Medical Boards. Note: It's not unusual for a physician to be sued—doctors make mistakes and encounter unexpected conditions. Patients may also hide their medical histories, and particularly in plastic surgery, some patients have emotional issues and are litigious.

"You don't want to see a pattern, or that their medical license has been taken away in different states," says **Dr. Pollard**. "Any types of censure by state boards or the loss of their license—that's serious." Also avoid doctors who have multiple malpractice suits that have gone to trial.

~ **Hilary Beard** is editor-in-chief of *Real Health and managing editor of the National Medical Association's NMA Healthy Living*

**Have you ever had cosmetic surgery, or are you thinking about it? For further information, please visit Dr. Pollard's website – [www.epollardmd.com](http://www.epollardmd.com).**