

Hook-Up Hiatus

Plastic surgery patients were once eager to get amorous again, but now, say docs, sex is low on their post-op to-do lists.

Photograph by ZACHARY ZAVISLAK

There are certain pre-op queries that plastic surgeons get used to hearing from their patients: “Will I really look like Angelina Jolie after this is over?” “Are milkshakes the best post-facelift meal?” “When can I get back to yoga?” But according to New York plastic surgeon Lawrence S. Reed, there’s one previously common question that nobody’s asking anymore. In the past, he says, “it was always, ‘My husband wants to know when we can have sex again.’ Now sex is never mentioned!”

Reed isn’t so daft as to imply that the act itself is going out of style, but, judging from recent conversations with patients, he believes that getting intimate with one’s partner has dropped to the bottom of a priority list that includes work, exercise and the continual quest for the fountain of youth. “Patients are mad when they can’t get back to the office in five days,” Reed says. “But if you say they can’t have sex for two weeks, they are like, ‘Thank God, put it in writing!’ People have other agendas now.”

It’s a sentiment echoed by a number of top cosmetic docs. “I tell my patients to manage the three E’s after surgery: emotions, exercise and eroticism,” says White Plains, New York, plastic surgeon Daniel C. Morello. That last one, he agrees, isn’t as pressing a matter as it used to be: “Interest in fitness and nutrition has supplanted sex as the No. 1 concern in many patients’ minds.”

It is due in part to today’s demanding schedules that doctors have developed procedures like lunchtime lifts and five-minute nose jobs, minimally invasive beauty boosters that require little, if any, downtime. But when major incisions are involved, post-op precautions must still be taken. After breast augmentation, liposuction or a facelift, doctors urge their patients to avoid athletic and amorous activities for two to three weeks. The danger is that as one’s heart rate increases, blood will flow more intensely to not-yet-healed vessels, which can increase swelling and cause bleeding.

Often it’s the patients eager to get back to the gym, not the boudoir, who are the most difficult to tame. Morello reports that clients try to negotiate treadmill speeds with him, and Philadelphia plastic surgeon James W. Fox IV says he finds himself assuring patients that “in three weeks I doubt very much that you’re going to get fat.”

For other patients, it’s the prospect of skipping an important board meeting that is most petrifying. “They know that if they’re not at the job, there’s someone else coming along,” says Reed, who surmises that “with sex, you don’t get the same recognition. At work if you’re doing great, people appreciate your productivity. It’s a very big high.”

New York psychotherapist Robi Ludwig attributes the changes in postsurgery priorities to a cultural shift in the way women gauge their desirability. “Maybe in the past sex was a way to affirm one’s appeal. Now it’s done in other ways,” she says. “One’s sexual identity may be less linked with how often I have sex than with who’s looking at me, who finds my body appealing. We live in a culture that says if you are not youthful, you don’t get noticed.”

Sylvia R. Karasu, clinical associate professor of psychiatry at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Medical Center, points out that even with surgeries designed to make patients feel sexier, having more sex isn’t the objective. “It’s such a totally self-oriented procedure most of the time,” she says. “It’s not necessarily related to the other people in their lives.”

Of the many doctors polled for this story, only two, Chicago facial plastic surgeon Steven H. Dayan and Beverly Hills facial cosmetic surgeon Robert Kotler, reported recent cases of patients ignoring the no-sex edict. The interesting twist: Both rule breakers were older men with young girlfriends. “He was recently divorced,” Dayan says of his patient. “I did his eyes and face, and then he had liposuction. He came in a week later and he just looked like crap, all blown up and swollen. He said to me, ‘Doc, I have a 27-year-old girl and I can’t disappoint her.’” Kotler’s patient, meanwhile, got hot and heavy just five hours after his facelift and necklift. “He said, ‘I must have forgotten because of the anesthesia,’” Kotler recalls. “Since that episode we strongly recommend against any ‘in-room guests’ the first night after surgery.” —JAMIE ROSEN

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