



feeling fine

Sleeve gastrectomy was just the thing this former athlete needed to get back in the game



Losing weight is one thing. Keeping it off is always another, as Susan Dees can attest.

The Hope Mills mother of two had always struggled with her weight, despite being a standout athlete growing up and staying active over the years. Constant dieting didn't help either. Whatever she lost on the bathroom scale always came back, and then some.

Two years ago, Dees had enough of the yo-yo dieting and decided to undergo weight loss surgery.

“What pushed me over was having trouble with my knees,” she said. “I’d always had problems with them because of sports, but the extra weight wasn’t helping.”

:: by Donnie Byers

Dees chose to have gastric sleeve surgery, also known as sleeve gastrectomy. It's still a relatively new bariatric procedure in the U.S but gaining popularity, due to its rapid ability to shed weight.

Recipients can expect to lose between 40 to 50 percent of their excess body fat within two years. Some patients have even lost half their body weight in less than 12 months. The surgery is minimally invasive and can be done in an hour under general anesthesia.

Dees didn't have to be sold on the surgery. She is Cape Fear Valley Medical Center's Chief Nursing Officer and regularly sees how it can make a dramatic impact on patients. A good working relationship with her surgeon and knowing Cape Fear Valley Medical Center is a nationally accredited center for bariatric surgery only bolstered her decision.

Looking back, Dees says gastric sleeve surgery changed her life. She lost 96 pounds within a year and looks like her old college self again. Walking is less of an ordeal too.

“I feel good,” she said, “very good.”

Such results have helped gastric sleeve surgery become the fastest growing weight loss surgery in the U.S. The procedure works by removing a large section of the stomach, along the greater curve. What’s left is a narrow tube-like canal or “sleeve” that holds just 15 percent of the original stomach capacity. Patients feel fuller with smaller meal portions as a result.

The stomach section responsible for producing the hormone Ghrelin is also removed. This hormone stimulates the brain into feeling hungry. So patients not only eat less, but also feel less hungry.

Another benefit is how the remaining stomach section continues to function normally. Patients can continue eating most of their favorite foods without suffering chronic stomach discomfort or “dumping syndrome.”

Other bariatric procedures have far more drawbacks. Although more popular, gastric bypass surgery requires the rearranging the entire digestive system. It also takes longer to perform, recover from, and can have more long-term complications.

Lap-Banding has been another popular bariatric procedure. It involves placing a silicone band around the upper portion of the stomach. This restricts food intake into the lower part of the stomach.

The procedure is reversible, unlike gastric sleeve and gastric bypass surgery. But the devices are still foreign objects left in the body. They can also slip, requiring routine adjustment at the doctor’s office.

James Classen, M.D., and Leo Davidson, M.D., are bariatric surgeons with Village Surgical Associates. They’ve been performing bariatric surgery since 2002 and say Lap Bands have fallen out of favor in recent years.

“We take out more Lap Bands than we put in now,” Dr. Classen said. “People who had them would still be hungry, the bands would slip out of place, or have other complications. Gastric sleeves are a much better procedure.”

Dr. Classen and Dr. Davidson, who perform the procedure as a team, started doing them just a few years ago. But the surgery is so in demand now that it makes up 40 percent of their bariatric surgery volume.



Ijeoma Ejeh, M.D., a bariatric surgeon with Ferncreek General Surgery, agrees that gastric sleeves are a better option than Lap Bands.

“The 10-year data isn’t quite there yet,” she said. “But what is out there so far, shows that weight loss is better than with the band. It’s also less complicated to perform than gastric bypass surgery.”

Dr. Ejeh has performed the surgery on patients ranging in age from 24 to 73 with good success, but doesn’t recommend it for teens. She said teenagers are better off going to comprehensive weight loss centers, which can offer a better support system.

Anyone considering gastric sleeve surgery should consult their doctor to see if it is right for them. Patients who have struggled with weight loss in the past and have a body mass index (BMI) of 35 or higher are usually good candidates.

As with any bariatric surgery, gastric sleeve surgery can have complications. They include stomach leaks, blood clots, infections, nausea, food aversion and stomach reflux.

Patients typically recover two days in the hospital and another two weeks at home. They will also need to continue to diet and exercise following surgery to achieve their weight loss objective.

People can learn more about gastric sleeve surgery and other weight loss options by calling Leisle Lynch at (910) 615-8373. Or they can attend monthly seminars held by Village Surgical Associates at Cape Fear Valley Education Center or seminars held by Dr. Ejeh at Ferncreek General Surgery.

The public can also join Cape Fear Valley’s new Facebook bariatric support group page. Just search Facebook using the keywords: “CFV Bariatric Surgery Support Group” and click Like.