



# VAGINAL NIP/TUCK: WOULD YOU DO IT?

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More women are paying for labiaplasty and other genital cosmetic procedures – just to look good down there. JEANNE TAI looks at the worrying upswing in “vanity” cosmetic gynaecology.

Sally, 40, is sitting outside a waxing parlour, waiting patiently for her bikini waxing session. The vivacious lawyer has had her public area groomed every month for 15 years. She describes herself as “obsessed” with hair removal.

Lately, she has been considering a more extreme down-south procedure: labiaplasty, or surgery to make her labia – the “lips” on either side of her vagina – smaller and more even. “Once your hair has been laid-off, you need a perfect ‘downtown’ as well,” she says. She’s been thinking about it ever since her friend Emma\* saw a plastic surgeon to nip up the area two years ago. No stranger to cosmetic surgery, Emma has also had a boob job and liposuction. Sally says her friend loved her new look vagina. “She said it felt good and looked nice afterwards.”

Sally’s grip is that one side of her inner labia is longer than the other, though that has never affected her sex life. “I’ve googled photos of other women’s vulvas and their look very neat. Mine doesn’t look quite right,” she says.

She could go to a gynaecologist or a plastic surgeon for a labiaplasty. The specialist would make a few incisions so that it is symmetrical down there. It costs upwards of \$5,000 and takes about an hour, depending on the complexity of the procedure. Her genitals might feel tender for one to three weeks after. She would be advised to avoid sex for up to a month.

Sally’s hesitating because she’s afraid of post-surgery pain. And because her husband would throw a fit. She

hasn’t breathed a word to him because he disapproves of cosmetic surgery and thinks his wife is fine the way she is.

But she feels differently. Asked to rate how happy she is with her nether regions, she says: “Five out of 10. Or less.”

**“Looks like an oyster”**

In Singapore and around the world, more women are opting for surgery to alter their genitals. Just like their boobs, tummies and thighs, their privates have become a new area for them to critique and correct.

While the thought of such surgery makes some women queasy, others have no qualms getting nipped and tucked down south. “You’re under general anaesthesia and don’t feel a thing,” says Beth\*, 40, a certified accountant, who recently got her labia reshaped. “Mine took an hour or two tops. The area felt tender for a few months after.”

The field of cosmetic gynaecology is growing globally. In 2009, American women spent an estimated US\$6.8 million (S\$8.6 million) on such procedures. In the UK, girls as young as 16 are reported to be considering surgery. This prompted UK Feminista,

a feminist organisation there, to protest the rise of “designer vagina surgery” recently. “Keep your mitts off our muffs” was one of their slogans.

Here, awareness of the field has grown since laser vagina rejuvenation (LVR, see story on next page) – a procedure to tighten vagina walls – received wide press coverage in 2006. Back then, Dr Martin Huang claimed to be the only plastic surgeon offering LVR. Now, at least five other doctors here offer it. And the changes aren’t just cosmetic, say some of them. They claim a prettier and tighter vagina can spice up your sex life.

As LVR became a “buzzword”, women learnt about related procedures like labiaplasty, says well-known plastic surgeon Dr Yvette Wu, who performs about 12 to 16 labiaplasties a year, all on local women.

No official figures exist, but plastic surgeon Dr Tan Ying Chien of The Sloane Clinic reckons labiaplasty is the fastest-growing type of vagina cosmetic surgery in Singapore. He can see up to four women a month asking for it.

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**How risky is labiaplasty?**

There should be few complications if the procedure is done by an experienced doctor in a clean and sterile environment, says gynaecologist Dr Christopher Ng. But there is always a risk of infection if you don’t keep the area clean. “Don’t forget to wear where you pee or poo, so it’s not a very sterile place,” Dr Ng says. “Plus you can’t exactly put a bandage over that area after surgery.” Other risks include pain, scarring, uneven healing and bleeding.

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Most ask for a reduction of the inner labia. This can be done for practical reasons – very long inner labia get in the way during sex and can cause discomfort when wearing fitted pants or bike riding – but more women are now concerned with how they look down there.

Dr Tan says his patients complain that their inner labia resemble waxy and irregularly shaped “oysters”. On their wish list: Tiny, tight and tucked-in folds. The women are professionals in their 20s or 30s who might have had some cosmetic surgery already, like Emma. They’re fairly attractive so they concentrate their energy (and cash) to improve that one spot on their bodies.

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Some women may do it to please their sexual partners. Others, like Sally and Beth, do it regardless of what men think. “It was a decision I made solely for myself,” says Beth, who is single, after I asked if she was influenced by a previous husband or boyfriend.

**What’s normal?**

Pandita attributes the rise of labiaplasty done for “vanity” reasons to the influence of pornography and trends like Brazilian waxing. We’re scrutinising other women’s vaginas and paying more attention to our own.

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— Dr Christopher Ng, a gynaecologist at GynaecMD Women’s & Rejuvenation Clinic

But here’s the rub: While our privates may not be so private anymore, the traditional shame and unease some women have about their ligates. Clinics say procedures like labiaplasty are unnecessary and prey on our insecurities about whether we measure up to perceived ideals.

When researching this story, I pinged when some medical experts described labiaplasty as the improvement of “waxed” labia that resemble “sea anemones” and look “silly” to men. How awful that our bodies are described this way.

Besides, there is no one “perfect” vulva or vagina. They come in all shapes and sizes. “As long as the labia are not excessively long such that they cause hygiene or functional problems, there shouldn’t be a need for surgery,” says Dr Christopher Ng, a gynaecologist at GynaecMD Women’s & Rejuvenation Clinic. And some women end up wishing they’d never fiddled with theirs.

Beth, the accountant, underwent labiaplasty because one of her “lips” was bigger than the other. She had felt uncomfortable wearing fitted underwear so she paid a renowned plastic surgeon in Bangkok US\$800 (S\$1,000) to shrink her labia. She assumed he would trim off the thick and dark outer edges, which she didn’t like, leaving behind the pink innermost parts.

But the doctor only did a cursory pre-operation consultation and didn’t find out what Beth wanted or explain the different ways labiaplasty could be done. “I didn’t do much research either and wasn’t aware what method he’d chosen,” she recalls.

As a result, he cut out the middle section of her labia (the pink part she wanted) but left the dark edges. A week after she returned home, the bruised area became infected with pus and

## Other procedures down there

Three “vagina vanity” fixes women are going for – but they are unnecessary. Cause for concern indeed.

**Laser Vagina Rejuvenation**

In LVR, a laser is used to long, loose vaginas muscle – it’s said to cause less scarring and bleeding than a traditional scalpel. The procedure is reported to improve your sex life because it “tightens” your vaginal canal. However, there is little scientific data to support its claim.

**Rejuvenation**

This procedure, also called hymenoplasty, re-attaches the hymen to give a “virgin” span. It’s typically performed on women who want to get married. Some women are driven to this procedure out of desperation.

**The ‘MissShed’**

Short for Clitoral amplification, this involves the doctor injecting your Clitoris with hyaluronic acid – a type of collagen – to temporarily increase its size so you reportedly feels better. There’s no scientific data to support its safety or claims.

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