

Fresh starts

She exercised, ate better and even had a personal trainer come to her home. But after two pregnancies, the flat stomach she so longed for wasn't happening.

The 53-year-old Cape Cod grandmother also realized there was nothing she could do about "the aging" of her face. So she spent the next year researching cosmetic surgery and talking to patients and doctors.

Today, after spending thousands on a tummy tuck, liposuction, botox, dental work and a non-surgical facelift, Sandra is "thrilled" with her new look.

"My stomach is flat. My teeth are beautiful. I'm just getting back what I had," said the upbeat Sandra, still swollen from a recent tummy tuck that will transform her from a size 12 to a size 6. Her last name is being withheld.

Plastic surgery is big business and becoming more common with the aging of baby boomers and better techniques. It's safer, there's less recovery time and it's not just for the rich and famous anymore.

"The stigma is no longer there. It's OK to admit that you want some changes," said Dr. Sheldon Sevinor, plastic and reconstructive surgeon with offices in Boston and the North Shore.

Another boost has been TV's reality makeover shows, like ABC's Extreme Makeover and FOX's The Swan.

But doctors and patients warn these often unsettling makeover shows trivialize the seriousness of plastic surgery. Some also say they create the illusion of instant results and unrealistic expectations.

"I am very disturbed by (The Swan). This should be done for the patient themselves and not for a competition," said Dr. William LoVerme, chief of plastic surgery at Newton-Wellesley Hospital.

Sandra's cosmetic surgeon, Dr. Christine Hamori of Duxbury, said she deters people who want multiple procedures done all at once after they see it on television.

"You don't want to push the envelope. It's just not safe," Hamori said.

Americans spent nearly \$9.4 billion on cosmetic procedures last year. According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 8.3 million cosmetic procedures were performed - four times the number done in 1997. A routine facelift costs more than \$5,000.

Before surgery, 52-year-old Carol only looked in the mirror once a day to apply makeup. She felt and acted young but said she "was looking like an old bag."

"I had a horrible chicken neck. I never liked what I saw," said the Tyngsboro woman, who didn't want her last name used. In February, Carol had a face and neck lift as well as an upper and lower eyelid lift by Sevinor, whom she calls "superman."

"I look in the mirror a lot more now. I have so much more confidence," Carol said.

After diet camp and countless weight-loss programs, Amanda Levine had gastric bypass surgery followed by a "total body lift" that included a tummy tuck and a butt, breast and outer thigh lift.

The 25-year-old Andover teacher once weighed 289 pounds and had "no social" life.

Now she's down to 145 pounds, works out almost daily, loves to shop, eats organic and has gotten engaged. (LoVerme did her body lift.)

"Oh my God, it's completely different," she says of life with her new body. "It was the best thing that I ever could have done. I can fit into an airplane seat."

But cosmetic surgery isn't without consequence. There's pain, recovery and a price tag. Like any surgery, it also can be deadly.

Sandra was home for two weeks after her "painful" tummy tuck and liposuction. Levine maxed out her credit cards paying for her full body makeover.

"It is major surgery," said Sandra. "It's something not to be taken lightly."

TOP COSMETIC PROCEDURES IN 2003

Top 5 nonsurgical	
1. Botox injection -	2,272,080
2. Laser hair removal -	923,200
3. Microdermabrasion -	858,312
4. Chemical peel -	722,248
5. Collagen injection -	147,173
Top 5 surgical	
1. Liposuction -	384,626
2. Breast augmentation -	280,401
3. Eyelid surgery -	267,627
4. Rhinoplasty -	172,420
5. Breast reduction -	147,173

Source: American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery.