

How to Support Someone Going for Weight Loss Surgery



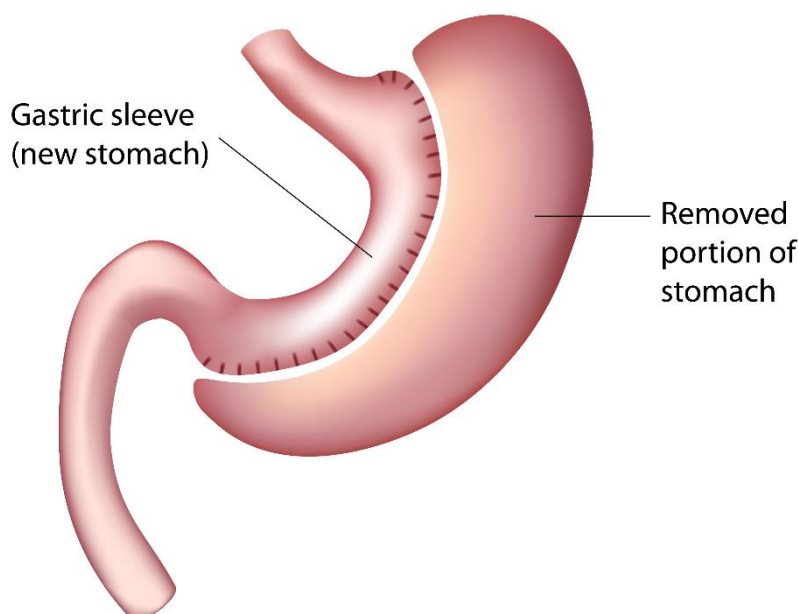
This leaflet is designed to provide helpful guidance for the family and friends of a person going for bariatric (weight loss) surgery. You may have lots of questions and concerns about this procedure and how it will affect your loved one, but also how it may affect your life long term. After reading this leaflet you should have a better understanding about what bariatric surgery is, why someone would choose to go for this type of procedure and how you can offer support.

What is Bariatric Surgery?

Bariatric surgery is a type of surgery designed to help people lose a larger amount of weight than would usually be achieved using a standard lifestyle programme. In NHS Grampian we routinely perform 2 types of bariatric surgery. Both these procedures are performed laparoscopically (key hole surgery) where possible and are irreversible/permanent. The type of surgery a person chooses to go for may depend on how much weight they need to lose, but also the decision may be based on any medical conditions or previous surgeries they have had.

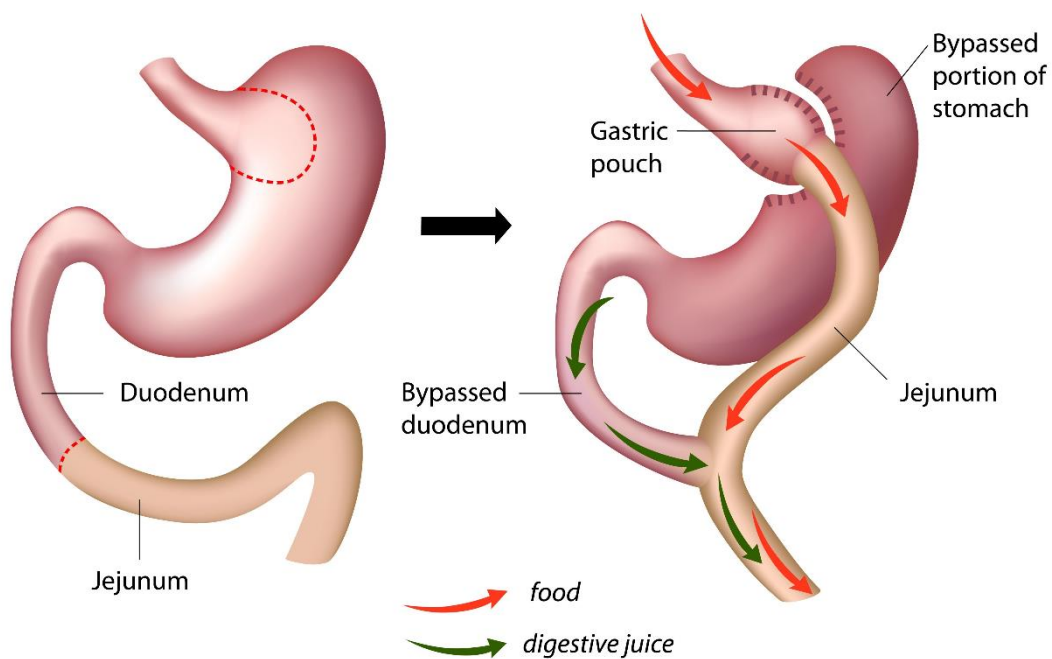
Sleeve Gastrectomy

This type of surgery involves removing a large part of the stomach to leave a smaller, banana shaped stomach. The part of the stomach that is removed is involved in producing hormones that control appetite. This results in restricting the amount of food a person can eat but also reducing how hungry that person feels – therefore leading to weight loss. A person having this type of surgery may typically lose 25% of their original body weight.



Gastric Bypass

This type of surgery involves removing a larger part of the stomach to create a much smaller stomach pouch, around the size of an egg. Part of the small intestine is then removed and reconnected to the new, smaller stomach. This results in severely restricting the amount of food that can be eaten, but also reducing the absorption of nutrients and energy from food. A person having this type of surgery may lose up to 30% of their original body weight.



Why would someone choose to have bariatric surgery?

Someone usually decides to have bariatric surgery after they have tried many other weight loss methods, such as a calorie controlled diets, exercising and weight loss support groups. Someone going for bariatric surgery will have thought long and hard about this decision to be sure it is right for them. They will have support from the team at the hospital as well as full education prior to surgery and for 2 years afterwards.

People often choose to have bariatric surgery because it can help them to manage other health conditions. For example, bariatric surgery has been proven to help manage Type 2 Diabetes, high blood pressure, joint pains, obstructive

sleep apnoea and many other conditions. The level of weight loss that can be achieved with bariatric surgery can also help to improve mood and overall quality of life.

Is bariatric surgery safe?

No type of surgery is risk free and people going for any operation will always be informed of any possible complications or risk of death. However, bariatric surgery has a very low mortality rate. In the short term, there is a small risk of post-surgical complications such as internal bleeding, a leak or an infection. Long term the risk of complications, such a vomiting or an ulcer, can be reduced by following all the diet and lifestyle advice.

How will bariatric surgery affect my loved one?

Having bariatric surgery is only the first step in this journey. Long term weight loss success and improvements in other health conditions requires lifelong changes to diet and lifestyle.

Bariatric surgery will have both physical and mental effects on a person. The physical restrictions on the amount of food that can be eaten means that the person will need to make changes to the way they eat and drink from day one to prevent side effects such a vomiting or pain. As long as they follow the guidelines they are given, these symptoms should be minimised.

Many people find that after a large weight loss they have more energy and are able to move around more easily. As a result, they are able to do activities that previously they could not and often have more confidence to try new things.

For people who use food as a way to offer comfort and manage emotions, the restrictive diet after surgery can lead to problems. Occasionally people may find they look for new ways to get comfort, for example by turning to alcohol, drugs, shopping or gambling. It is important that people find new ways to manage stress and other emotions prior to surgery to prevent problems arising afterwards.

How can I offer support?

Support from family and friends is essential for the person undergoing bariatric surgery. Start off by having a discussion around why they want to go for surgery and try to understand these reasons. Remember that this will not have been an easy decision to make and they will likely be feeling anxious about it.

It is important to have a good knowledge about the types of bariatric surgery and the surgical pathway. Reading this leaflet, plus others your loved one may have been given, can help. Ask if you are able to attend any of the pre-surgical appointments and write down any questions you may have prior to attending.

Try to support your loved one with making good diet and lifestyle choices. Write out a plan together of healthy meals you can both eat. Remember that in the long term, people after bariatric surgery are able to eat most foods but will need to continue to stay away from high fat/high sugar choices. If you like to snack on high calorie foods, it can be helpful to do this when your loved one is not around so as not to tempt them. Bariatric surgery can often be a good excuse for you both to make healthier diet and lifestyle choices!

Rather than feeling left out if your loved one now wants to do more activities or try new things, why not offer to try these things with them. This can be a great opportunity for you both to find new activities you may enjoy and perhaps spend more quality time together. The person having surgery may feel daunted by the thought of trying new activities but with your support this can seem much easier. If you are not able to join in the activity you can still offer your support and encouragement.

How might bariatric surgery affect me?

Although you are not the person going for surgery, it is likely to have an impact on you and your life too. It is likely that you will feel a whole range of emotions when someone you care about chooses to go for bariatric surgery.

Romantic relationships

It is inevitable that there will be some changes in your relationship after bariatric surgery. Evidence suggests that people who had a good relationship prior to surgery will continue to do so. However, losing weight can create challenges in a relationship that was struggling pre surgery.

Jealousy/ Insecurity

This can be a common feeling after a partner or friend has bariatric surgery. You may feel jealous that they have lost a large amount of weight, particularly if you also struggle with your own weight. You may feel left out that your loved one is open to trying new activities or making new friends. You may feel insecure due to your loved one's newfound confidence. This might trigger thoughts such as

they will want to be with someone else more attractive or more interesting. It is important that you recognise these feelings and discuss them with your loved one. It is likely they have no idea you feel that way and would hate to think that you are feeling left out. Ignoring these emotions could eventually lead to feelings of resentment in your relationship, and in some cases may jeopardize the relationship.

Worry

Bariatric surgery is a major operation and it is only natural that you will be worried about your loved one. Reading up on the procedure beforehand and getting answers to all the questions you may have should help to reassure you.

In the immediate post-surgery phase, your loved one will only be able to eat and drink in very small quantities. This can be alarming for you if you feel they are not getting enough nourishment or are purposely starving themselves. Be reassured that this is normal and that over time the quantities of food they can eat will increase. It is important not to encourage your loved one to overeat as this will likely cause them pain and/or to vomit. Instead, be supportive by helping to plan meals and create relaxing mealtimes.

Not Needed Anymore

Perhaps you are the person who plans and prepares all the meals. This may be the way that you show your loved one that you care. After surgery, your loved one will need to make significant dietary changes which may mean that the foods you normally prepare are no longer suitable. This can leave you feeling unwanted. Remember, they are not rejecting your food to be hurtful. Rather than sitting with these feelings, discuss with your loved one how you can modify the foods you prepare to make them more suitable.

Sabotage

Although this seems like a harsh word, sabotage attempts can often be unintentional. This can include offering unsuitable foods to your loved one, buying food gifts, cooking unhelpful foods, serving up larger portions or encouraging them to eat more. We know that this is sometimes done when you are feeling insecure in the relationship and feel that if your loved one gains weight things will go back to how they were.

It is important to recognise these behaviours and to think about other ways in which you can treat your loved one that does not involve food. For example, you

could buy flowers or a favourite magazine, or suggesting you do an activity together such as a nice walk.

Lifestyle Changes after Surgery

There are certain situations that you may not have considered can be affected after bariatric surgery. In particular, these can include social situations, special occasions or holidays. For many people, eating has become a central part of spending time together. If this is something that you do a lot of together it might be a good idea to try and find other things that you both enjoy.

Eating Out in a Restaurant

After bariatric surgery it is unlikely your loved one will be able to eat a full portion of food that would be served in a restaurant. Eating out in a restaurant can therefore create feelings of anxiety for them. Try to be supportive by helping to choose a suitable restaurant together. Stay away from places that are unlikely to offer suitable choices e.g. American style diners. Consider if you could share a main meal, or perhaps they could just order a starter.

Events involving alcohol

It is recommended that a person stays away from alcohol for the first 6 months after bariatric surgery in order to give their new stomach time to heal. Long term, the way the body handles alcohol will have changed, meaning they are more likely to feel the effects of alcohol more quickly and after fewer drinks. Alcohol is also a source of empty calories and so may be something people want to stay away from after surgery to prevent weight regain. With all this in mind, your loved one may feel anxious about social occasions where alcohol is present. Reassure them that it is not essential they drink alcohol, and if they do, help them be mindful of how much they have had to drink.

Celebrations

It is often tradition that we celebrate special occasions with food. For example, a cake for a birthday, a special meal for an anniversary or the traditional Christmas feast. It is helpful to consider how these events could be marked in a new way that does not involve food. For example, an outing to a favourite museum or gallery for a birthday or revisiting a special place for an anniversary. For events that are likely to involve food, such as Christmas, consider planning

ahead for healthier meal options and ways that would not draw attention to the small amounts your loved one can eat, for example a serve yourself buffet.

Other points to consider

Be careful not to become overly critical

It can be easy for a friend or family member, who is trying to be helpful, to become like the “food police” and constantly be asking “should you be eating that?” Although this may be well intentioned it may cause your loved one to withdraw from you or start to hide their eating. If you feel they may have slipped back into old habits try to discuss this sensitively at a time when neither of you are eating. Ask if there is anything you can do to support them to make healthier choices. Remember that surgery is only a tool to help with weight loss, but it requires long term diet and lifestyle changes that often means changing habits and routines that have been formed over many years.

How to acknowledge someone’s weight loss

It can be difficult to know how to acknowledge a person’s weight loss after bariatric surgery. You may want to congratulate them on all the weight they have lost but this is not always a welcome comment for people who have had surgery. They are likely to be very sensitive about their weight and body shape therefore perhaps try to offer praise in other ways rather than just focusing on numbers. You might want to say things in relation to their behaviour rather than appearance e.g. “I really enjoy the fact we are able to do more activities together now.” When someone is obese they often describe feeling invisible and that after weight loss people who have never spoken to them before suddenly start congratulating them. This can make them feel like they were not worth talking to at the size they were before. It is nice to be able to give positive comments on how someone is looking, but try to do it in a sensitive manner.

Intimacy

You may expect that after a large weight loss your partner will be feeling more confident about their body, however often the opposite can be true. After bariatric surgery people can find that the loose skin they are left with can leave them more unsatisfied with their body than they were before. This can make being intimate with a partner difficult. You can be supportive by not pressurising

your partner if they do not feel ready and to be sensitive to how they may be feeling.

And finally

Bariatric surgery affects everyone differently and the key thing to negotiating this journey successfully together is to be honest, keep lines of communication open and be prepared to change together.

Helpful Resources for Further Information

Websites

NHS Choices - <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/weight-loss-surgery/>

Patient Info - <https://patient.info/healthy-living/obesity-overweight/weight-loss-surgery>

Weight Loss Surgery Information - <http://www.wlsinfo.org.uk/>

Bariatric Cookery - <https://www.bariatriccookery.com/>

Books

The Bariatric Bible by Carol Bowen Ball

Carb and Calorie Counter by Chris Cheyette and Yello Balolia

Your Complete Guide to Weight Loss Surgery by Lisa Kaouk and Monica Bashaw