

Complex Surgery Requires Comprehensive Pain Management

The decision to undergo an elective surgical procedure is not one to be taken lightly,” observes Dr. Cindy Wu, a plastic surgeon specializing in breast and body plastic surgery with Cynthia Gregg, Face & Body Specialists. “All surgery comes with inherent risks, one of which is post-surgical pain. And that is especially true for the complex surgical procedures I perform.

“In addition to the concern about pain management,” notes Dr. Wu, “the national crisis of opioid addiction has underscored the importance of protecting patients from the risks of addiction—while still providing effective pain management. This is a responsibility I take very seriously, which is reflected in my approach to post-operative pain management.

“That approach involves an opioid-sparing protocol,” she explains, “in which a combination of non-opioid medications is used in a specific timed sequence to begin managing pain before surgery begins.”

“There is still a time and place for opiate use,” says Dr. Wu. “However, I find

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that, by using an opioid-sparing protocol, my patients need fewer opioids post-operatively while still achieving appropriately controlled pain at home.”

INTRA-OP PAIN CONTROL

As Dr. Wu discusses her approach it is clear that, when it comes to pain, prevention is key. Reducing severe pain is a much taller order than preventing it, and Dr. Wu leaves nothing to chance when it comes to the comfort and recovery of her patients.

“For example, during a breast procedure,” she explains, “I do what’s called an intercostal nerve block in addition to traditional anesthesia. With a nerve block,

I am putting local medication right at the site where the nerves come out, so for a breast procedure that is just below the ribs.

“The purpose of this is two-fold. During surgery, although you are unconscious and have no awareness of pain, your body is still capable of responding to the stimulus of surgery. This may present as an increased heart rate or rising blood pressure—signs that the body is responding to pain. As we monitor these responses, we are able to determine if more anesthetic is needed to inhibit the body’s signaling and experience of pain, and the nerve block is a very effective way to do this without adding more systemic medication. Less systemic medication means less chance of that post-anesthesia ‘hangover’ that leaves you feeling groggy, disoriented, and nauseated.”

The second purpose of the local anesthetic, explains Dr. Wu, “is that it provides pain relief for hours after surgery. This is important because when a patient wakes up in the recovery room in comfort instead of pain, fear is reduced—which, in itself, reduces pain—and the brain is primed to require less narcotic medication afterwards.”

RECOVERY

Immediate post-operative pain control has its obvious benefits, but new developments in anesthetic medications now mean Dr. Wu is also able to provide non-opioid pain management well into the recovery phase.

“New local anesthetics can last for up to 72 hours,” Dr. Wu says. “For many of my patients, this is long enough to get them through the days that would typically bring the most discomfort, so that by the time the medication is wearing off, the body is already well on the way to recovery. Additionally, these longer-acting meds allow patients to participate in rehabilitation activities sooner, speeding up recovery time.

“Recovery is all about pain management,” Dr. Wu emphasizes. “If you don’t wake up disoriented and in pain, you aren’t going to experience the fear of pain. Effective, non-opioid pain management also means getting back to your life, with confidence, energy, and feeling revitalized as quickly as possible. That is our goal.”

DIFFERENT PROCEDURES, DIFFERENT CONCERNS

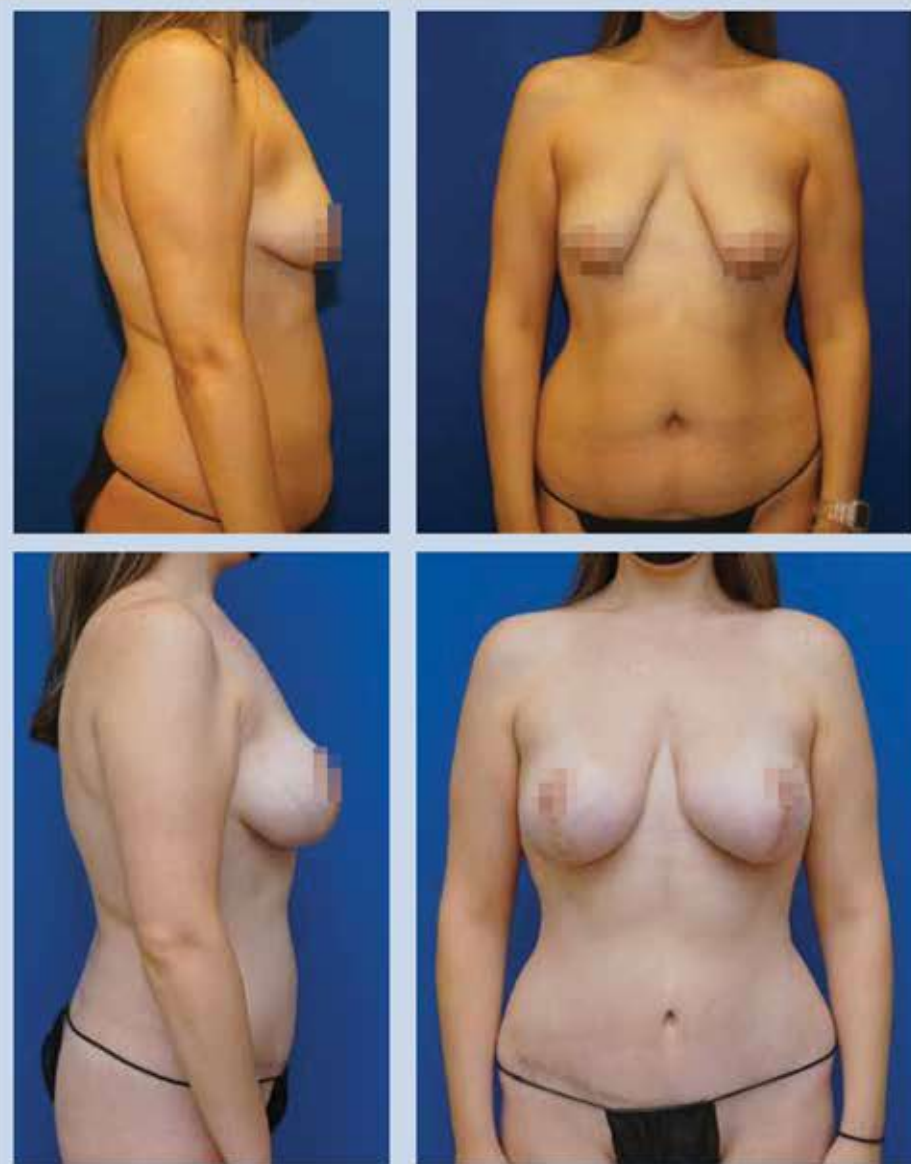
“Pain management is especially important whenever you’re doing a larger, more complex surgery and has to be in the forefront of your mind,” says Dr. Wu. “The most commonly requested procedures in my practice are combination procedures, often referred to as ‘mommy makeovers’—which are any combination of breast and tummy surgeries. For example, such a surgery might include a tummy tuck or liposuction of the abdomen combined with a breast augmentation, or breast lift or breast reduction. Often these surgeries will also include implants. Each of the procedures involved has its own pain implications to be considered.”

In a typical mommy makeover, explains Dr. Wu, “I’ll be doing a tummy tuck with breast surgery. For the breast surgery, I’ll give the patient a breast block—called an intercostal block—right before even the incision is made. That’s so that your body is not sensing pain when the incision is made, which means that the anesthesia provider doesn’t have to give you as much pain medication, and that will mean that you will have less of a hangover when you wake up.

“Further, by using the intercostal block, it sets your brain up for less requirements for narcotics post-op, which is a real benefit in recovery. Also, by giving patients oral meds before surgery, we can help decrease your pain requirements post-op, as well. So, I give patients Tylenol and gabapentin before surgery, which calms the pain receptors in your brain before the incision’s made. That also sets you up to need less narcotics post-op.

“Tummy tuck patients get the same medications before surgery, but they also get a long-acting injection into the muscle repair of a non-opioid analgesic called EXPAREL, so that it doesn’t hurt as much post-op. That’s important, because the muscle repair is what really is most painful for patients after a tummy tuck. Again, that sets them up for needing less pain medication afterwards.”

Tummy tucks, explains Dr. Wu, “involve sewing muscles together that have separated with pregnancy or weight gain, and because it involves a double layer of muscles, it can be very sore following surgery, especially in the first week. So, we want to do everything we can to minimize post-op pain and to give patients a variety of options when it comes to pain control. They might get a narcotic, but they will also get a muscle relaxer, or something for nerve pain. There are a number of possible options available.”



The complexity of a “mommy makeover”—involving breast implants or lifts and a tummy tuck—requires special care in managing post-surgical pain. Images here are before and one year after surgery.