

Patients achieve long-term success after weight loss surgery

By Ruth Fields
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For years, Anne Scarcella was on a weight loss rollercoaster. Several times, she lost weight, only to gain it back again.

Anne knew people who had successfully lost weight with help from gastric banding surgery, so she investigated. She also did some “personal soul searching” and decided that she was ready to take action.

“My goal was to get to a healthy weight so I could buy clothes at any store in the mall,” she said.

As a result of her research, Anne decided that Dr. Richard Wilkenfeld was the right doctor to perform her gastric banding surgery. She liked the fact that Wilkenfeld and his wife, Tina, work with patients before and after surgery to educate them, to encourage them and to help ensure that they successfully lose weight. She understood that the surgery was not “magic,” but would help her feel full so that she could lose weight.

“You have to decide that you are going to take charge and get the benefit from this fantastic tool that modern medicine has brought us,” she said.

Wilkenfeld's staff educated Anne before the surgery so she'd know what to expect; afterwards, they worked with her to monitor her progress. Anne believes that the main reason she lost weight successfully was because she took advantage of this service.

“I did what the doctor said,” she said. “I trusted them to perform the surgery and I really listened to their instructions. They are truly interested in your success. They are with you every step of the way to make sure you are successful. I really believe that Tina and Dr. Wilkenfeld have their patients' best interests at heart.”

Soon after Anne's gastric banding surgery in May 2007, she began to lose weight. When she was at her heaviest, she hadn't felt like working out, but after she lost 50 pounds – inspired by her success and lighter on her feet – she felt like exercising. She began working out at a gym and eventually took up long-distance cycling.

About eight months after her surgery, Anne had lost 106 pounds. She continued losing until she had lost 130 pounds and had reached her goal weight. She recommended gastric banding surgery to her daughter, Rachel Moore, who lost 92



Anne Scarcella lost 130 pounds after undergoing gastric banding surgery.



pounds after undergoing the procedure.

“It has been a great thing for her,” Anne said. “She hasn't had the lifelong struggle of gaining and losing. Sometimes I think she can't appreciate how great her band is.”

One of the best things about the surgery, Anne said, is that it has enabled her to maintain a healthy weight. It has now been three years since Anne's surgery and she has no regrets.

“If you are willing to put a little bit into it, you will get so much out of it,” she said. “I have seen it transform people's lives and it has definitely improved mine. I can't say enough good about it.”

In 2003, Wilkenfeld, a general surgeon, attended the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas for a fellowship in bariatric (weight loss) surgery. Soon, he became one of the first surgeons in the Conroe area to offer surgically-implanted gastric bands.

Because gastric banding procedures are performed laparoscopically, they are usually done on an outpatient basis and cause little post-operative pain. Patients generally recover in a couple of days to two weeks; some return to work the day following their surgeries.

During a gastric banding procedure, Wilkenfeld places a silicone ring with an inner balloon around the upper portion of the stomach, which reduces its size. Only a small pocket at the top of the stomach can be filled with food. Because the fibers that send the message of satiety to the brain are located at the top of the stomach, the gastric band enables patients to feel full after small meals. Most patients, like Anne, find that that gastric banding surgery equips them with an effective tool for weight loss.

“It suppresses hunger so that in between meals, you're not hungry,” Wilkenfeld said. “Not only do we feel full

quicker with the lap band, but we feel full longer. And it stays that way the rest of your life.”

In 2005, Wilkenfeld dedicated his practice to bariatric surgery.

“I'm doing this to increase your health, eliminate, hopefully, some of the diseases that may be plaguing you, increase your longevity and improve the quality of your life by being able to get out and get around and do things you might not be able to do because of your weight,” he said. “And there is a cosmetic benefit, too.”

About two years ago, Wilkenfeld moved his office to a center specifically designed to provide weight loss surgery follow up.

New surgical option available to help patients lose weight



Dr. Richard Wilkenfeld has noticed that some of his patients tend to be hungry all the time, even when they avoid hunger-causing simple carbohydrates, like sugar and white bread. Others do not choose gastric banding surgery because they think they'll be inconvenienced by periodic adjustments.

For such patients, a new surgical technique can be the answer. Sleeve gastrectomy

involves the removal of about 70 percent of the stomach, including the part that secretes ghrelin, the hormone that causes hunger. The surgery does not bypass the intestine and does not cause gastrointestinal malabsorption.

Wilkenfeld and his staff work with their sleeve gastrectomy patients, as they do all their patients, to educate them before surgery and to help them afterwards to ensure they successfully lose weight.

“That is our specialty,” he said. “That is what sets us apart from almost all other surgeons.”

Because many of Wilkenfeld's patients have been overweight for most of their lives, it sometimes surprises them when they are able to recoup the cost of surgery through savings on food, doctor's visits and medications. A 2001 study showed that morbidly obese individuals pay on average \$1,297 per month more than people who maintain normal weight.

Periodic adjustments of the gastric band make it a lifelong tool for managing weight. Many young women are pleased to learn that the surgery is compatible with future pregnancies and that their babies will benefit from their healthy weight.

The standard for weight loss success is maintaining weight loss for five years; Wilkenfeld is happy that so many of his patients have achieved that goal. Such patients are understandably pleased.

“We have patients come in who ask to see their pre-op pictures,” Wilkenfeld said. “They stand around and compare them to how they look now.”

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