

HITTING THE RESET BUTTON

Weight-Loss Surgery Offers a Second Chance for a Healthy Life

As a nurse practitioner specializing in pediatric cardiology, Christine Butterman has seen firsthand the damage obesity can do to the body—particularly to the heart.

Butterman's own battle with weight gain progressed gradually, beginning in her late 20s and becoming increasingly challenging as she began working full time, got married and had two children. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to shed the excess pounds over the past several years, she decided to look into weight-loss surgery, also known as bariatric surgery, to help get her back to living a healthy lifestyle.

"I tried all the diets that were popular, and I would lose 10 pounds, but then gain back 20," says Butterman, 46. "The weight kept accumulating, and it became very frustrating. I felt limited in what I could do with my children, and I felt bad all the time. My blood sugar level and blood pressure also started creeping up, and as a nurse practitioner, I knew those changes would have negative long-term effects on my health. It got to the point where I wanted to make a significant lifestyle change."

Butterman underwent gastric bypass surgery

at Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital in January 2015, following a year of preparation during which she began making incremental, manageable lifestyle changes, such as cutting out sodas one month and cutting down portion sizes the next. By the time she went in for surgery, Butterman had already lost about 40 pounds, and during the year since her surgery, she has lost approximately 100 additional pounds.

"I've had excellent success," says Butterman, who has two children—son, Alex, and daughter, Emily—with her husband, Matt. "I'm eating much healthier and making better choices. My activity level has increased as well. Every now and then I'll have a treat, but in those instances I'll just eat a small portion."

A Tool to Promote Healthier Living

Weight-loss surgery isn't for everyone, but for the right patients the procedure can spur dramatic improvements in health and quality of life. The providers at the Sentara Martha Jefferson Bariatric Care Center see weight-loss surgery as a tool to help



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patients manage their weight and begin healthier eating and exercise habits.

“One thing we always tell patients is to expect to make major lifestyle changes if they decide to have weight-loss surgery,” says Jayme Stokes, MD, a surgeon with Sentara Martha Jefferson Medical & Surgical Associates. “To be most successful, patients should think of surgery as a tool that pushes them down the road to weight-loss success. I tell them: ‘I can give you a hammer, but if you don’t pick it up, you can’t build anything with it.’ In the same way, if I provide a patient with any type of gastric surgery, but they don’t learn to make healthy eating choices and exercise regularly, they’ll never lose weight effectively.”

Dr. Stokes follows the guidelines set by the National Institutes of Health as a starting point to determine who is a good





candidate for weight-loss surgery. Patients are eligible for bariatric surgery if they have a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or over—or 35 and over for those with chronic conditions linked to obesity, such as diabetes, high blood pressure or sleep apnea. Most insurance providers have additional requirements for their customers, including mandatory enrollment in a medically supervised weight-loss program for a certain period of time.

Butterman started preparing for weight-loss surgery in January 2014, when she went to an information seminar at Sentara Martha Jefferson Hospital. The seminars, led by one of Sentara Martha Jefferson's bariatric surgeons, provide information to help participants determine whether weight-loss surgery is the right choice for their circumstances. The sessions cover many topics related to bariatric surgery, including descriptions of each surgical procedure, questions to ask the insurance company, information about Sentara Martha Jefferson's support services and the

responsibilities of each patient. Live seminars are offered monthly at the hospital, and the sessions also can be viewed online.

"The staff at Sentara Martha Jefferson gave me all the information I needed to prepare for the surgery and recover," Butterman says. "I felt well informed about everything, and that helped the process go smoothly."

When Dr. Stokes first sees a patient who is interested in weight-loss surgery, he begins with a comprehensive review of the patient's medical history and a thorough physical exam. He then discusses the patient's previous weight-loss attempts and reviews the pros and cons of each procedure to help determine which option might be the right choice.

Three Weight-Loss Surgery Options

Bariatric surgical procedures help patients lose weight by altering the stomach or gastrointestinal tract in a way that limits the amount of food the stomach can hold and how many calories and

nutrients the body can absorb. Sentara Martha Jefferson offers the following three types of weight-loss surgical procedures:

- **Adjustable gastric band.** In this procedure, the surgeon places a plastic ring around the top of the stomach, just below the point where it connects to the esophagus. Inside the ring is a balloon that is connected to a thin tube, which is attached to a port placed under the skin. The surgeon can then add or remove fluid, as needed, to tighten or loosen the band and control the amount of food that moves through the top of the stomach. This technique is designed to give a feeling of fullness so that the patient will eat less.
- **Gastric sleeve.** This procedure involves reducing the size of the stomach by approximately 75 percent, to about the size and shape of a banana, restricting the amount of food the patient can eat.
- **Gastric bypass.** The most complicated procedure of the three bariatric options, the gastric bypass involves a rearranging of the intestines. The surgeon starts by creating a stomach pouch out of the normal-sized stomach. Next, the small intestine is divided, and the upper portion is attached to this new stomach pouch. Food will go directly

into these cavities and pass into the middle section of the small intestines. This procedure not only limits the amount a person can eat, but also the amount of food and nutrients absorbed.

For most patients, these procedures can be performed using a minimally invasive laparoscopic approach, according to Dr. Stokes. Patients typically spend one to two nights in the hospital, but in some cases the gastric band procedure can be done on an outpatient basis.

Weight-loss surgery comes with risks similar to those of any other surgery, including blood clots, bleeding and infection. One long-term risk of the bariatric procedures is malnutrition from not eating a balanced diet. To mitigate this risk, patients work with a nutritional counselor at the Sentara Martha Jefferson Bariatric Care Center to learn to eat

the right kind of diet—typically high in protein and low in carbohydrates. Dr. Stokes also puts patients on vitamin and mineral supplements to help fill in any significant nutritional gaps.

“Every patient needs to learn to take in appropriate amounts of the right kinds of foods,” Dr. Stokes says. “They need to get the ‘biggest bang for the buck’ with food intake.”

After weight-loss surgery, patients are monitored closely, with frequent follow-up exams during the first year after surgery and annual exams for the rest of their lives. To help patients maintain their lifestyle changes, the Bariatric Care team includes mental health professionals who can help patients identified as needing additional support.

“We have lots of conversations with patients about how they’re trying to change 20, 30 or 40 years of eating behaviors,”

Dr. Stokes says. “We want to help them get to a whole new place. The most challenging component of this job is not the surgery itself, but the mental health component that goes along with it.”

Overall, Sentara Martha Jefferson has excellent outcomes that compare to those of other programs in Virginia and throughout the United States. On top of outstanding results, Sentara Martha Jefferson offers the Caring Tradition, which puts patient care at the center of its mission.

“We are a small program with a stable, friendly staff,” Dr. Stokes notes. “We strive to treat our patients like family.”

Meet Dr. Jayme Stokes

For Jayme Stokes, MD, providing surgical options to help people lose weight is giving them a second chance for a healthier life.

After graduating from East Carolina University (ECU), Dr. Stokes received his medical degree from ECU’s Brody School of Medicine. He then completed his residency and a fellowship in microscopic and bariatric surgery at the University of Virginia School of Medicine. He also received additional fellowship training in abdominal transplant surgery at UVa. Dr. Stokes says his medical and surgical training allow him the privilege of giving patients “a whole new lease on life.”

“Bariatric surgery gives the patients a chance to hit the reset button,” Dr. Stokes says.

He has seen some patients lose so much weight following surgery that they are able to go off their medications for diabetes or high blood pressure, or to get rid of the CPAP machines used to treat sleep apnea.

Dr. Stokes celebrates every success with his patients.

“I get that reward of giving patients another chance,” Dr. Stokes adds. “Obesity is a disease, and our society is slowly recognizing that. But it’s a disease that’s correctable, and we have several good surgical options to help do that. It’s an incredibly rewarding field.”





Living Well After Surgery

Jami Curry, a 10th-grade English teacher at Louisa County High School, has battled weight gain since she was a teenager. She tried low-carb diets and was able to drop about 25 pounds, but the weight loss was difficult for her to maintain. Encouraged by her OB/GYN, Dr. Kelly Owens, Curry attended a weight-loss seminar at Sentara Martha Jefferson to learn more.

“I was always the chunky girl, and I wanted to change that,” says Curry, 37, who praises the support she has received from her husband, Chris, daughter Clare, and other family and friends. “I looked at the results of people I know who had weight-loss surgery, and that gave me confidence to pursue it as an option.”

In December 2014, Curry underwent the gastric sleeve procedure. Since then, she has lost 97 pounds.

“She looks absolutely amazing,” says Dr. Stokes, who performed both Curry’s and Butterman’s procedures. “Mrs. Curry has been a poster-child patient, having taken the surgery and used it to the fullest extent to improve her health.”

In addition to committing to healthier eating, Curry also exercises regularly by participating in Jazzercise and using the elliptical machine and treadmill at her fitness facility.

“Now I have energy to get up and move,” Curry says. “I’m not as sluggish as I felt before I lost all this weight. Dr. Stokes was the most amazing doctor ever—he’s very kind, and his bedside manner is very nurturing. He truly cares about his patients, and he doesn’t rush through conversations—he really listens. I’m so glad I had this procedure done at Sentara Martha Jefferson. I’m happy, and I can’t stop smiling.”

Butterman adds that the support of her family has been key in helping her make the necessary lifestyle changes to lose weight effectively. She recommends weight-loss surgery for others who are struggling with obesity.

“I absolutely encourage people to do it,” Butterman says. “I encourage them to do their research first because the information I obtained ahead of time was important in helping me make the right choice. That research also will let them know what they’re getting into, because it is a major change that will last a lifetime. But in the long run, it’s a good change.”

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Is Weight-Loss Surgery for You?

If you have been thinking about weight-loss surgery or are interested in learning more, attending an information session is the first step. The Sentara Martha Jefferson Bariatric Care Center offers two information options.

Attend a Live Session—To register for one of our upcoming seminars, please call 1-800-SENTARA. The class is FREE, but registration is required.

Attend an Online Session—An online video seminar is available by visiting www.sentara.com. After watching the video, you will be asked if you would like to be contacted by a member of the team to arrange an appointment to discuss your eligibility and options.