



Dr Wei-Han Chen Plastic Surgery Inc.

Ground floor Suite 3, Netcare Rosebank Hospital
11 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, 2132
Website: www.whcplasticsurgery.co.za
Tel: +27 11 328 0500
Email: weihanchen@whcplasticsurgery.co.za

Facelift Surgery (Rhytidectomy)

Patient information leaflet

This leaflet provides general information about facelift and neck-lift surgery. It does not replace a personal consultation, examination, or the consent process with your surgeon. Your procedure, recovery, risks, and expected results will depend on your health, facial anatomy, and the surgical technique used.

What is a facelift?

A facelift, also called a rhytidectomy, is an operation designed to improve visible signs of ageing in the lower face, jawline, and neck.

Depending on your needs, surgery may involve:

- Repositioning deeper facial tissues and muscles
- Removing or redistributing excess fat
- Redraping and removing loose skin
- Tightening tissues beneath the chin and in the neck

A facelift may be combined with a neck lift, eyelid surgery, brow lift, fat transfer, liposuction, or a skin-resurfacing treatment. These are separate procedures with their own benefits and risks.

Why does the face change with age?

As we age, several changes occur:

- Skin gradually loses elasticity.
- Facial fat may shrink, move, or become unevenly distributed.
- Deeper supporting tissues become looser.
- Facial and neck muscles may lose tone.
- Gravity contributes to sagging of the cheeks, jawline, and neck.

- Sun exposure, smoking, weight changes, and inherited characteristics may accelerate these changes.

Common concerns include jowls, loose skin beneath the chin, deeper folds around the mouth, and loss of definition along the jawline.

What can a facelift improve?

A facelift may improve:

- Sagging of the cheeks and lower face
- Jowls and reduced jawline definition
- Loose skin of the neck
- Some deeper folds between the nose and mouth
- Bands or fullness beneath the chin when neck treatment is included

A facelift cannot stop the ageing process. It also does not reliably correct fine wrinkles, sun damage, uneven pigmentation, or skin texture. Treatments such as laser resurfacing, chemical peels, injectable treatments, or medical skin care may be more appropriate for these concerns.

Is a facelift right for me?

You may be a suitable candidate if you:

- Have facial or neck sagging that concerns you
- Are in generally good health
- Have realistic expectations about the outcome
- Do not smoke, or are able to stop for the period advised by your surgeon
- Understand the recovery process and possible complications
- Are choosing surgery for yourself and have had enough time to consider your decision

There is no single “correct” age for a facelift. Suitability depends more on your anatomy, skin quality, health, expectations, and degree of ageing than on age alone.

Your consultation

During your consultation, your surgeon should:

- Ask what you would like to change and why
- Review your medical history, medicines, allergies, smoking, and previous surgery
- Examine your face, neck, skin, hairline, and facial symmetry
- Explain which procedure or combination of procedures may be suitable
- Discuss the likely benefits, limitations, scars, recovery, and material risks
- Explain alternative treatments, including doing nothing
- Show you where the incisions are likely to be placed
- Allow you sufficient time to ask questions and decide without pressure

Be open about your expectations. Perfect symmetry or a guaranteed result cannot be promised.

How is the operation performed?

Facelift techniques vary. Surgery may be performed under general anaesthesia or, in selected cases, under local anaesthesia with sedation.

Incisions are usually placed within the hairline and around the natural contours of the ear. They may extend behind the ear and into the hair-bearing scalp. If the neck is treated, a small incision may also be made beneath the chin.

The surgeon may lift and reposition the deeper tissue layer, often referred to as the SMAS, before redraping the skin. Excess skin is removed without placing unnecessary tension on the closure.

Your surgeon will explain the proposed technique, expected operating time, and whether you are likely to go home the same day or stay in hospital.

Scars

A facelift always leaves scars. Incisions are positioned to make them as inconspicuous as possible, but scar quality varies.

Scars are commonly red or firm at first and usually fade over 12 to 18 months. Some people develop widened, raised, uneven, painful, or more visible scars. Hair growth may change around the incisions, and temporary or permanent hair loss can occur.

Preparing for surgery

Follow your surgeon's instructions carefully. You may be asked to:

- Stop smoking or using nicotine well before and after surgery
- Avoid certain medicines, supplements, or herbal products that increase bleeding
- Complete medical tests or obtain clearance from another doctor
- Arrange transport home and help during the early recovery period
- Prepare loose, front-opening clothing
- Avoid eating or drinking for a specified time before surgery

Do not stop prescribed medication unless the clinician responsible for your care tells you to do so.

Contact the surgical team before the operation if you develop an infection, fever, skin problem near the surgical area, or any change in your health.

What should I expect after surgery?

After surgery, you may have dressings, a supportive garment, and occasionally drainage tubes. Your face may initially look swollen, bruised, tight, uneven, or overcorrected.

Common temporary effects include:

- Swelling and bruising
- Tightness or pulling
- Numbness around the cheeks, neck, and ears
- Mild to moderate discomfort
- Temporary changes in facial movement
- Tiredness and emotional ups and downs
- Temporary changes in the hairline or sideburn area

Swelling and bruising are often most noticeable during the first several days and commonly improve over two to three weeks. Some residual swelling, firmness, numbness, or asymmetry may persist for several months.

Sutures or clips are removed according to your surgeon's instructions. Many people feel comfortable returning to social activities or non-strenuous work after approximately two to three weeks, but recovery varies.

Your final result cannot be judged immediately. The tissues may take six to nine months, and sometimes longer, to settle fully.

Looking after yourself

Your surgeon will give you instructions specific to your operation. These may include:

- Keeping your head elevated, including while sleeping
- Taking prescribed medication as directed
- Keeping dressings and incisions clean and dry
- Avoiding bending, straining, heavy lifting, and vigorous exercise
- Avoiding smoking, vaping, and nicotine
- Protecting healing scars from sunlight
- Attending all follow-up appointments
- Avoiding driving until you can safely perform an emergency stop and are no longer taking medication that impairs alertness

Do not apply creams, makeup, hair products, or heat to the operated area until your surgical team says it is safe.

Risks and possible complications

Every operation carries risks. Although many people recover without a serious complication, it is important to understand what could happen.

Possible risks include:

- Bleeding or a collection of blood beneath the skin (haematoma), which may require urgent surgery
- Infection
- Delayed healing, wound separation, or skin loss
- Unfavourable, widened, raised, or painful scars
- Temporary or permanent numbness or altered skin sensation
- Injury to facial nerve branches, causing temporary or permanent weakness
- Persistent pain, tightness, or tenderness
- Fluid collection beneath the skin
- Prolonged swelling or bruising
- Facial asymmetry or contour irregularity
- Changes in the hairline, sideburns, or earlobe position
- Temporary or permanent hair loss around the incisions
- Pigment or colour changes in the skin
- Visible or irritating buried sutures
- An unsatisfactory result or a change that makes you feel unlike yourself
- Recurrent sagging as ageing continues
- The need for corrective or additional surgery
- Anaesthetic reactions
- Chest infection
- Blood clots in the legs or lungs
- Heart attack, stroke, or, very rarely, death

Smoking and nicotine significantly increase the risk of poor healing and skin loss. Certain medicines, uncontrolled high blood pressure, and some medical conditions can also increase risk.

Your surgeon should discuss the risks that are particularly relevant to you.

When should I seek urgent help?

Contact your surgical team immediately if you develop:

- Rapidly increasing swelling, especially on one side
- Severe or worsening pain not controlled by medication
- Persistent bleeding
- A sudden change in skin colour
- New or worsening facial weakness
- Increasing redness, heat, pus, or an unpleasant smell from a wound
- Fever or feeling increasingly unwell
- A wound that opens or appears not to be healing

Seek emergency medical attention for:

- Difficulty breathing

- Chest pain
- Sudden collapse, confusion, or weakness
- Pain or swelling in one calf
- Severe swelling of the face or neck, particularly if it affects breathing or swallowing

How long will the result last?

A facelift can produce a long-lasting improvement, but it does not stop ageing. Your face will continue to change with time.

The duration of the result varies with skin quality, genetics, sun exposure, smoking, weight changes, health, and the technique used. Some recurrent looseness is expected, and further treatment may eventually be considered.

Alternatives to facelift surgery

Depending on your concerns, alternatives may include:

- No treatment
- Injectable treatments for selected lines or volume loss
- Laser or other skin-resurfacing procedures
- Chemical peels
- Medical skin-care treatments
- Fat transfer or facial fillers
- Liposuction beneath the chin
- A brow lift or eyelid procedure
- A limited face or neck procedure

Non-surgical treatments cannot provide the same degree of tightening as surgery when there is significant loose skin or deeper tissue descent. They also have their own limitations and risks.

Questions to ask your surgeon

- What procedure do you recommend for me, and why?
- What result is realistic?
- Where will my scars be?
- Who will perform my operation and anaesthetic?
- How often do you perform this procedure?
- What are your complication and revision rates?
- What happens if I have a complication?
- What aftercare is included?
- When can I return to work, exercise, driving, and normal activities?
- What costs might arise if I need further treatment?
- Can I see examples of results in patients with similar concerns?

Important reminder

Facelift surgery is an elective operation and should not be undertaken under pressure. Take time to consider the expected benefits, limitations, risks, recovery, and financial implications.

This leaflet is for general education only. It is not a substitute for individual medical advice or the formal consent discussion with a suitably qualified surgeon.