

# Mental health problems worsen with cosmetic surgery

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Plastic surgery does little to alleviate mental health problems. In some cases, the new look even worsens symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Girls who undergo cosmetic surgery are also more likely to have sustained injury from cutting themselves.

That is the conclusion in a new study by Tilmann von Soest and colleagues at Norwegian Social Research, who looked at younger women's mental health before and after plastic surgery.

About seven percent of Norwegian women between the ages of 18 and 65 have undergone cosmetic surgery, according to Statistics Norway.

They found that girls who decide to undergo cosmetic surgery are on average more depressed and anxious than those who do not. They are also more prone to suicide.

## **Mental health may worsen**

This is both before and after the surgery, which suggests that the plastic surgery does little to alleviate mental health problems. What's more, some of the symptoms of poor mental health are on average even worse after the operation.

"It seems like those who get cosmetic surgery have more problems than others," says Associate Professor Ingela Lundin Kvalem, a co-author of the study. "And after the surgeries, their symptoms of depression, anxiety, eating disorders and excessive alcohol consumption have increased."

Kvalem explains that these women do not have a lower self-image than others in the first place - their decision to undergo cosmetic surgery might be an attempt to deal with other problems they have in their lives.

Getting plastic surgery to improve one's appearance might seem like a quick and efficient remedy, but when their lives fail to improve, their mental health problems might worsen - perhaps because of the disappointment.

"Cosmetic surgery doesn't solve all problems," she says. "It's a quick fix of body parts they're dissatisfied with, but the effects aren't as far-reaching as some people seem to expect."

## **A comprehensive study**

The study is different from most research on cosmetic surgery. The researchers used data from a survey of thousands of school children between the ages 12-19 years and followed them up with additional questions,

two, seven and 13 years later.

The study's design made it possible to measure the respondents' mental health years before some of the adolescents reported to have undergone plastic surgery. The mental health of these women was also assessed after the surgery was completed.

### **Larger breasts, shorter lives**

The uniqueness of the study makes it difficult to compare with previous research, but there is some support for their controversial findings.

In a 2003 study, Finnish researchers looked at causes of death among women with breast implants and found that there was an excess of suicide in their sample.

"People met the results of the Finnish study with disbelief," says Kvaem. "But it turns out that the researchers were onto something."

### **Most girls are pleased with the results**

Women who undergo cosmetic surgery are usually very pleased with the results:


"Girls who enlarge their breasts, for instance, tend to think that this area of their body has become more attractive," she says.

This is generally the case: women rate their amended body parts higher, post-surgery - but Kvaem says that they are not more satisfied with their overall appearance.

Perhaps this is not too different from how people enjoy a payrise - they quickly grow accustomed to their new and improved situation. Women with cosmetic improvements might be happy with the results, but ultimately, they do not rate their own mirror image any better than they used to.

"Cosmetic surgery has a minimal effect on people's self-image," says Kvaem. "It's OK to change what you're dissatisfied with, but life is not necessarily going to get better."

 [About seven percent of Norwegian women between the ages of 18 and 65 have undergone cosmetic surgery. \(Illustration photo: Colourbox\) \[7\]](#)

 ["Cosmetic surgery doesn't solve all problems," says Associate Professor Ingela Lundin Kvaem. \(Photo: UiO\) \[8\]](#)

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July 4, 2012 - 05:00

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