

Patient Information Sheet

Facelift

Jagdeep Nanchahal BSc, PhD, MBBS, FRCS (Plast), FRACS
Professor of Hand, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery
Imperial College, University of London

www.jnanchahal.com

What is a facelift?

A face lift is an operation to lift the skin and underlying soft tissues of the face to achieve a more youthful appearance.

Background

The effects of ageing are often most apparent on the face and time and gravity act to lead to dropping of the brow, loss of the cheek (malar) prominence, deepening of the grooves which run from the nose to the corners of the mouth, more prominent jowls and sagging of the neck. The face can be analysed in sections of upper, middle and lower third, as the effects of ageing affect the different areas to varying degrees in different people. The upper third comprises the brow and eyes, and is dealt with in a separate information sheet. The middle third is the region of the malar and cheek, including the naso-labial grooves. The lower third encompasses the jaw-line. Face lifting used to be performed in older patients but it is now common for people aged about 50 years.

Preoperative assessment

The type of surgery is tailored to suit the individual. Loss of the malar prominence in young patients can be corrected using a SOOF lift, which is achieved using an incision at the margin of the lower eyelids (see information sheet on eyelid and brow surgery). At the opposite end of the age spectrum, tightening of the skin alone via incisions which run in front of and behind the ears usually produces dramatic results. However, individuals with deep naso-labial grooves, prominent jowls and neck folds are best served by a SMAS (superficial musculoaponeurotic system) lift, when the thin muscular layer deep to the skin is elevated and tightened. Therefore, the type of face lift is tailored to the individual. The fine wrinkles around the eyes and mouth are not removed by a facelift.

The operation

Surgery is performed under general anaesthesia and you will be asked not to eat or drink for at least 6 hours before the operation. You should avoid wearing any make-up that day. Local anaesthetic solution is also injected during the surgery to reduce bleeding and help with postoperative pain relief. The incisions for a facelift run in front of the ears into the temporal hairline and continue around the lobe of the ear backwards into the hair. The skin of the face and neck is lifted and the SMAS is elevated as a separate layer. The tightening effect is mainly achieved by pulling on the SMAS rather than the skin and this avoids the problems of widened scars, distorted ear lobes and a disharmonious facial appearance, which has become associated with some facelifts. Dressings simply consist of some tape over the neck and most patients spend one night in hospital.

After surgery

Immediately following surgery, there is considerable swelling and some bruising. The face and neck feel tight, stiff and numb. Sleeping propped up helps reduce the swelling. The stitches are removed between 5 and 14 days. You can wash your hair after 5 days. The swelling and bruising are much improved by three weeks but, depending on the type of operation, take 3-6 months to

subside. The swelling in the neck is often the most persistent. The numbness over the cheeks also takes several months to settle. Some patients find that taking arnica tablets for a week or so before surgery reduces the swelling. You should avoid straining or heavy lifting to minimise the risk of bleeding, and stopping smoking is vital. You should avoid any medication containing aspirin for two weeks before surgery to avoid the risk of bleeding.

Possible complications

- As after any surgery, bleeding or infection can rarely occur. If there is significant bleeding, the clot may need to be removed under a further general anaesthetic.
- There may be persistent darkening of the skin from the bruising and in some people fine veins in the skin can become more prominent after surgery.
- The pattern of the hairline may be altered and sometimes there is temporary thinning of the hair near the incisions.
- Some people develop red, thick prominent scars, which may require steroid injection to accelerate their maturation. These hypertrophic scars are most common behind the ear.
- Loss of blood supply to the skin, particularly behind the ear, is a rare but significant complication and is much commoner in smokers. This can lead to unsatisfactory scarring.
- The most serious complication of a facelift is injury to the facial nerve, leading to a lopsided smile, drooping of the corner of the mouth or the brow. Bruising of the nerve recovers over a period of a few hours or days but a more permanent injury is said to occur in 1-2% of patients.
- Alteration in sensation of the skin of the cheeks and ears is common and sometimes there is unevenness or the cheek contour