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More blacks seek to 'look, feel' better

By Shirley Hawkins
OW Staff Writer

Where once plastic surgery was considered a "taboo" topic among African Americans--fears ranged from going under the knife and emerging from a haze of bandages with features looking "too white" to hesitation over various surgical procedures--new and improved techniques as well as an increased acceptance of plastic surgery among various ethnic groups have an increasing number of African Americans getting nipped, tucked, reshaped, enlarged and injected. In fact, according to statistics, African Americans comprise one of the fastest groups in the United States seeking plastic surgery.

Whether it's to recapture a feeling of youth and vigor or to turn back the clock to fight gravity and age, more African Americans are visiting the plastic surgeon's offices in surging numbers, adding to an already \$8.4 billion a year industry.

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, the number of ethnic patients who chose to enhance their appearance or minimize the signs of aging through cosmetic plastic surgery took a substantial jump in 2005, with nearly 2.3 million procedures performed--an increase of 65 percent from 2004, according to statistics released earlier this year. There were 10.2 million cosmetic or aesthetic plastic surgical procedures performed in the United States last year.

In 2005, Hispanics lead the way among ethnic groups with more than 921,000 cosmetic procedures performed, up 67 percent from 2004; followed by African Americans with 769,000 procedures, up 67 percent; and Asians with 437,000 procedures, up 58 percent.

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According to statistics, African Americans made up 8 percent of the 10.2 million cosmetic plastic surgery procedures in 2005. The most popular major cosmetic procedures requested by African Americans are nose reshaping, breast reduction, breast augmentation, eyelid surgery and liposuction and tummy tucks.

Dr. Lance Wyatt, a Harvard-trained African American plastic surgeon based in Los Angeles, said that he has noticed a significant increase in the number of African American patients in his waiting room. "There's been an increase in economic power in the various ethnic groups, which has made plastic surgery more affordable," Dr. Wyatt pointed out. "Years ago, patients were asking for features you might find in northern Europe. Today, I'm finding that more and more of my ethnic patients want to retain their ethnic features and unique characteristics," said Dr. Wyatt.

And surprisingly, more African American men are seeking to improve their appearance, as well. "More African American men are coming in for injectible fillers for wrinkles, botox, eyelid procedures and liposuction," said Dr. Wyatt.

Dr. Anthony Griffin, an African American plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills, agreed. "Women still make up the majority of patients, but we're seeing a steeper rise in the number of men getting plastic surgery done, because they are more concerned about their image," said Griffin.

Faced with a youth-driven society, Dr. Wyatt said that more African Americans are becoming more accepting of surgical procedures to enhance their appearance. "There's been a major shift nationwide and certainly a shift in the African American community as the positive effects of plastic surgery become more known among various ethnic groups. As our work force ages, people want to look younger to compete with younger employees, and everyone wants to look and feel their best. We live in a society that values youth and beauty, and everybody desires these things, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background," observed Dr. Wyatt. "African Americans are not different from anybody else," he pointed out. Hollywood has always been conscious of a glamorous image, and a growing number of African-American celebrities are availing themselves of plastic surgery. Patti LaBelle, Toni Braxton, Janet Jackson, Queen Latifa, Tina Turner and Dwayne (The Rock) Johnson, wrestler-turned-movie star, have been rumored to have undergone surgical procedures in the past several years. With more African American celebrities accepting plastic surgery, regular people are also seeking out cosmetic procedures as a viable way to change their appearance.

Rhinoplasty--reshaping the nose--is one of the most popular procedures among African Americans. "The cost varies, but it runs anywhere from \$5,500 to \$12,000," said Dr. Wyatt. "Another popular surgery is breast reduction. Most patients can have these procedures done and be back at work within a week. There's less pain and there's less down time for recovery."

"The increase (in minorities getting plastic surgery) can be, in large part, attributed to greater exposure to the benefits of plastic surgery, a growing acceptance of the specialty, and increased economic power within these ethnic groups," said ASPS president Bruce Cunningham, MD. "Ethnic patients are reading about plastic surgery in their favorite magazines or newspapers and watching the latest advances regularly on the nightly news--plastic surgery is now primetime."

Dr. Wyatt said that the media and a youth driven society continues to influence more African Americans to seek plastic surgery in an effort to remain youthful or just to improve their body image.

Dr. Griffin, a graduate of Brown University and the University of Southern California, is considered one of the foremost

authorities on plastic surgery for African Americans and ethnic skin types. Griffin, an African American, has emerged as a crusader to spread the word that minorities who have plastic surgery no longer need to copy traditional beauty ideals. "I want people to know they can enhance their natural beauty and still retain their ethnic identity," Dr. Griffin said.

The popular plastic surgeon is a pioneer in scar-free surgery for scar-prone minorities and he has also originated a number of revolutionary procedures, including the "Brazilian Butt Lift," for those who want to sculpt their figure to look like Beyonce or J-Lo; the "Six-Pack Tummy Tuck," for those who want fit-looking looking abs, and the "No-Tell Nose Job," which Dr. Griffin said is nose surgery without a trace.

One concern for African American patients has always been keloids or scarring, but Dr. Griffin tells his African American patients that although keloids or scarring after plastic surgery is possible, innovative techniques in plastic surgery have come a long way in making keloids and scarring less visible. "Today, surgeons can use various techniques to minimize keloid formation and scarring, such as special stitching techniques and using surgical adhesive in the place of sutures to close incisions," said Dr. Griffin. "In addition, skin lighteners can help with dark spots due to minor traumas of the skin."

While some African Americans shun plastic surgery for fear that it will "change" their ethnic features, Dr. Emily Pollard, a plastic surgeon in Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, disagreed. "I think it's a myth that plastic surgery robs you of your ethnicity. I don't know what's ethnic about bags (under your eyes,)" Pollard stated in Ebony.

But the American Board of Medical Specialties and the American Board of Plastic Surgery said that when considering a cosmetic procedure, it's important to keep one's goals reasonable. Many plastic surgeons suggest bringing in a picture of yourself when you were younger, as opposed to a photo of a celebrity, because it is easier to achieve the body you used to have rather than someone else's. They also recommended that potential patients should make sure that the surgeon is clear about the changes the client wants--and those they don't.

"Also, don't be afraid to ask if a plastic surgeon has performed operations on other African Americans," said Dr. Julius Few, assistant professor at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "Any good one should be happy to divulge this information and be willing to refer you to another physician if you find their experience is lacking."

Dr. Few also noted, "Feel free to ask for before and after photos of other African Americans who have had a similar procedure; you may even be able to speak to these patients and ask questions you aren't comfortable asking your doctor. They can speak from experience about the procedure itself, the pain involved and the healing process. Most importantly, understand that plastic surgery is not for everyone, and it isn't a cure-all," Dr. Few pointed out.

Dr. Few said that potential patients of plastic surgery should really "soul search" as to why they want to go under the knife. "Having plastic surgery to save your marriage or impress a group of friends is not what it should be about," he said. "It should be about doing something that will make you, as a man or woman, feel better about yourself in a reasonable way, and understanding that the goal is to try to improve, but not to have perfection."

Katie Johnson, 68, said that she's noticed that African Americans are more accepting of plastic surgery than they were decades ago. "Before, most people were busy raising a family. You didn't care about how you looked," Johnson observed. "But more blacks are looking into plastic surgery. I had a friend who wasn't happy with her nose because she felt it was too wide," recalls Johnson. "She went to the plastic surgeon and he took a little bit off her nose make it less broad, but she still has a 'black' nose. She still pretty much looks the same--she just has a little less nose. She told me after the surgery that she was happy with the results."

But Dr. Wyatt said that African Americans should thoroughly contemplate the reasons why they want to have plastic surgery. "Surgery is not for everyone," warned Dr. Wyatt. "Potential patients can't come in and think botox is going to fix everything, because it's not."

Kamilah Parker, 23, a cosmetologist, said that although a growing number of African Americans are seeking plastic surgery, she feels that the media may be sending the wrong message. "A lot of African Americans are not satisfied with themselves," observed Parker. "They see all these celebrities and music videos and they want to look like the people on television." Byron Johnson, a shoe care owner at the Baldwin Hills/Crenshaw mall, felt that blacks who sought plastic surgery were going to the extreme. "If they want to do that, that's on them," stated Johnson. "I could think of a better way to spend my money other than getting plastic surgery. I think breast and lip enhancement is ridiculous because to me, it shows you have low self-esteem. If you can't deal with what God gave you, then the problem is obviously deeper than plastic surgery," said Johnson.

Tammie Valerio, 30, who owned Exotic Spa and Body, observed, "I don't think blacks need plastic surgery because our skin is naturally beautiful. I feel that the only reason why a women should resort to plastic surgery is if they have bad skin. As far as going under the knife to look like Janet Jackson, that's ridiculous."

With media constantly bombarding viewers with images of "instant" vitality and youth on shows such as "Extreme Makeover" and "The Swan" which were watched by millions, some observers feel that the emphasis on getting 'nipped' or 'tucked' may be sending a misleading message to some segments of the population. "You have all these shows that say you can turn your life around and become a better person by having all these makeovers," said T. Joel Wade, chairman of the psychology department at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pa. who specializes in black self-esteem. "I think, personally, people who may not have considered plastic surgery before are thinking, 'Hey, here's a way to make my life better...but if you have other problems in your life, getting a new nose or cheekbone implants is not necessarily going to change all that," said Wade.

Anna Johnson, 52, a vitamin salesperson, said that she was concerned with the interest of blacks in plastic surgery. "We're not aging gracefully, we're aging fearfully," maintained Johnson. "Here we are running around trying to get plastic surgery because society does not approve of aging, it frowns on aging--but aging is inevitable."

Johnson further observed; "We have been indoctrinated to believe that we have to stay young and getting old is not an honor, but a curse. Is there really a fountain of youth? A lot of us have that concept in our mind," said Johnson. "We need to change our attitude about aging because aging is inevitable. It's going to come, so why not change our attitude instead of our appearance?" Johnson theorized.

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Plastic surgery among the Hispanic groups is not uncommon even before now, in the 1980's there was uproar on the beauty pageant circuit after Venezuela admitted that many of the country's representative beauty queens had plastic surgery in preparation for competition of the Miss World/Universe crowns; it was standard for any of the young women who chose to enter such pageants there. It almost cost them the numerous crowns that have been won by Miss Venezuelas'. Since that time I don't think there's been a crown won by any of their candidates in the world competition.

Atisha

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plastic surgery is known to most ppl as a 'white ppl thing' but now everybody wants to do it and it seems like the next thing ppl are going crazy over is bleaching...

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