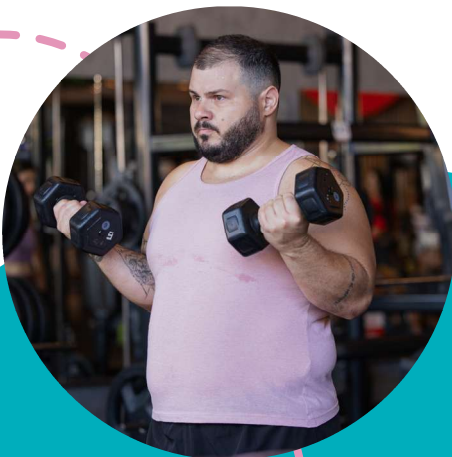




Excess skin after significant weight loss

When embarking on a weight loss journey, one important aspect that is often overlooked is the potential for developing excess skin. This guide is designed to give you essential information on why excess skin can occur after significant weight loss, what factors affect its development, and practical advice on how to manage it.



Why we need to think about skin changes with weight loss

Excess skin can be a common side-effect of losing a significant amount of weight. How we feel about having excess skin is very individual.

While many may view any excess skin as a “badge of honour,” and a reminder of how far they have come in managing their weight and improving their health, others may find the development of excess skin distressing.

In fact, studies suggest that a proportion of individuals who have bariatric surgery say they regret having the surgery because of the changes to their appearance and skin^{1,2} and the impact this might have on their lives.

While changes to your skin might not be something that you are worried about when starting on your weight loss journey, it might be something that you worry about in the future.

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This extremely important information is not always provided when joining a weight management programme. However, when it can leave you mentally and physically scarred, then I feel it should be part of the education, and preparation of what can lie ahead.

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Patient comment



Good to know

A proportion of individuals who have bariatric surgery say they regret having the surgery because of the changes to their appearance and skin.

Your skin

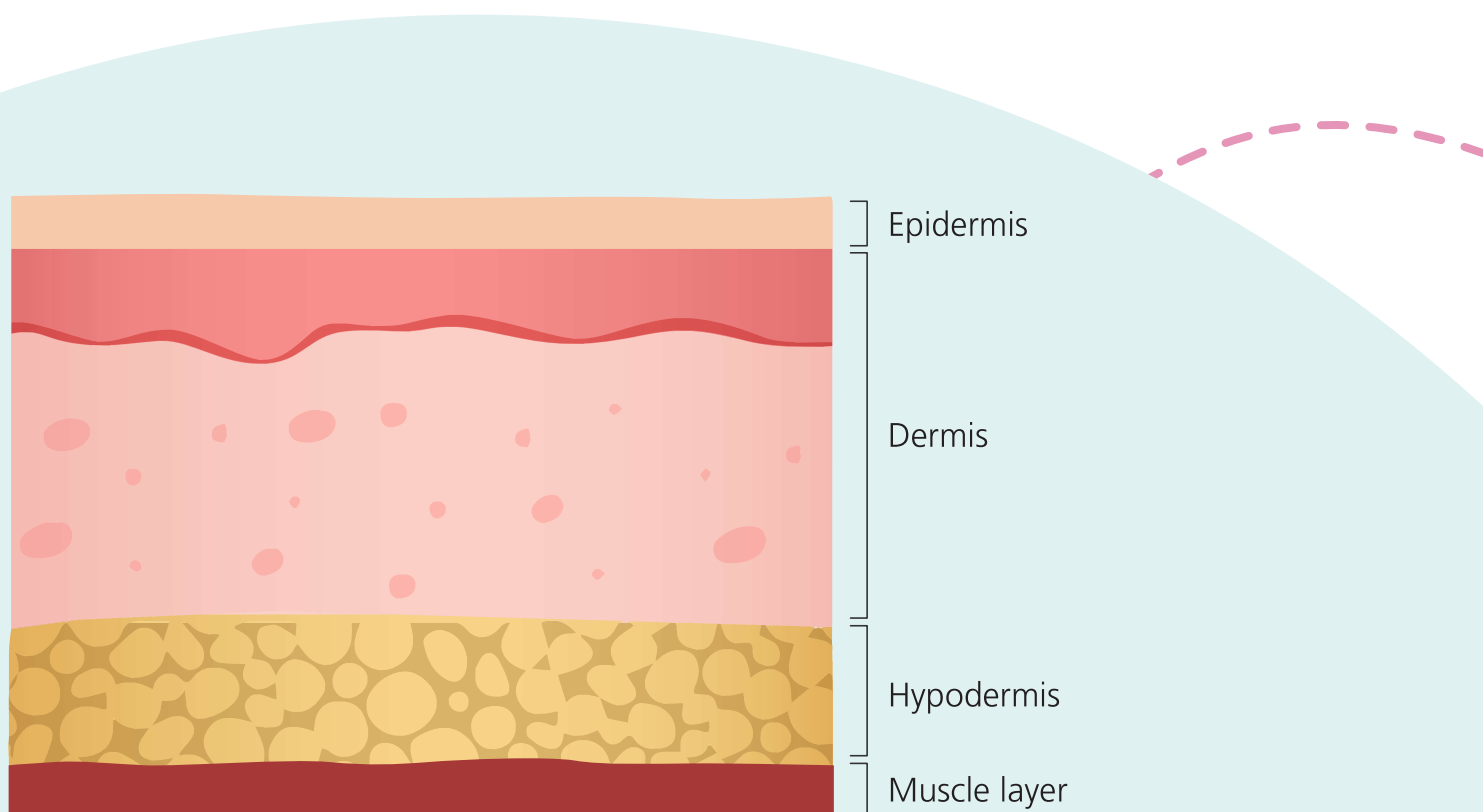
Your skin is your body's largest organ. As we grow, our skin grows with us, and it can expand to accommodate added weight. But once it expands, it does not necessarily go back to its original smooth, tight state on its own after that extra weight is gone.

To understand the cause of excess skin after weight loss, it is important to learn how skin is made up and how it works. Skin has three basic layers which all do important jobs to keep your body healthy.

The top layer (epidermis) is the one that is visible. It provides protection, makes new skin cells, and provides skin colour or pigment.

Just beneath the epidermis is the middle layer, or dermis. It makes collagen and elastin to keep the skin strong and stretchy helping the smoothness of skin.

The bottom layer is the hypodermis. This layer has fat, connective tissue, and more nerves and blood vessels. It cushions the top two layers and works to protect the rest of the body. It is the hypodermis's ability to store fat that comes into play when you gain or lose weight.



What is excess skin?

Following any significant weight loss, you might start to notice changes in your skin texture and elasticity such as your skin becoming looser or sagging.



Image: UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health

Excess skin is particularly common around areas like your stomach, breasts, hips, arms, and legs. A number of factors can affect how your skin responds to weight change such as your genetics, age, and the amount of weight loss. The development of excess skin is particularly common after bariatric surgery and other methods such as obesity management medications.

Genetics

As with many health conditions, genetics play a role in your skin's ability to "bounce back" after a period of weight loss. Please be assured that excess skin is not your fault and can just be something that you are more likely to get compared to others who have also undergone significant weight loss.

Age

As we get older our skin loses elasticity. Reduced elasticity may make it harder for skin to recover as weight reduces. Skin elasticity is what allows for your organs to expand beneath the skin when you gain a lot of weight. As you age, your body produces less of the essential proteins needed to support skin elasticity, such as collagen and elastin, which can also cause skin to sag



Image: UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health

Amount of weight lost

While changes will vary from person-to-person; the more weight you lose, the more likely you are to have excess skin. This is because the skin may have been stretched by excess weight prior to weight loss.



Image: © World Obesity

How might excess skin affect health and wellbeing?

Those living with excess skin may experience physical health issues such as skin irritation, dermatitis or itching. These issues can have a negative effect on daily activities, such as going to the shops, walking, and physical activity.

Excess skin has also been linked to the development of poorer mental health or psychological distress including issues with body image and intimacy within relationships.

Side-effects of having excess skin and how to manage them



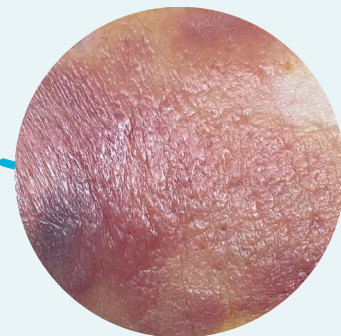
Hygiene issues

Excess skin can form folds that trap moisture, sweat, and germs. Washing between the folds with pH-balanced liquid soap, cleanser, or disposable wipes before gently patting skin dry is recommended. Roughly drying and rubbing the skin dry can cause skin damage. Avoid wearing tight clothing, you can try wearing items made from quick drying fabrics.



Loose skin rash

If moisture continues to collect within folds of skin, the skin can rub together and cause a health problem called intertrigo. This red or brownish-red rash is more common in warm, humid environments and during the summer months and can cause itching and stinging. In the first stages, you can take steps to keep skin dry. If left untreated, this rash can lead to an infection.



Skin infections

Although common and typically not serious, thrush can happen in loose skin folds. This can cause discomfort, unpleasant smell, redness, itchiness, and burning. If left untreated, this can worsen. Seek advice from your healthcare provider or local pharmacist.

Chafing

Another of the challenges with loose skin and ability to move around is chafing. Like a skin rash, chafing happens when skin rubs against skin or clothing, causing redness, bumps, itching, burning, or warmer skin. If left unattended, the symptoms can become more uncomfortable and even lead to bleeding or an infection. Although typically not serious, keeping the skin dry and clean is important to prevent this condition.

Mobility issues

If you have lost a significant amount of weight, loose skin may present challenges beyond hygiene and infection. For some, it can interfere with activities and exercise. Excess skin on the thighs, upper arms, and belly can make movement difficult. Even after reducing body fat, you may still come across obstacles in your daily life.



How to care for your skin after weight loss

If you have already reached your weight loss goal, there are still actions you can take to improve your skin's firmness and tone if that is important to you. An approach that includes nutrition, exercise, and healthy skin care can help.

Build muscle

Increasing muscle mass can help you look and feel better, and improve your overall health fitness, even after your weight loss goal is reached. When building muscle is the goal, specific types of exercise, like those used in strength training, isolate muscles and help strengthen and increase their size.

Seek medical advice before starting any new exercise routine. In some body areas, skin elasticity will stay loose.



Nutrition

Is important to have a balanced diet that provides all the nutrients your body needs for healthy living and to reduce the risk of disease.

Eating a balanced diet will not reverse excess skin but it provides the conditions needed for your body to keep and rebuild skin structure, especially when paired with exercise and good skincare.

Eating a balanced diet may mean eating some foods more often and in larger amounts than others. It is important to be aware of portion sizes, as eating too much or not enough of any type of food can raise your risk of health problems. This is because your body may be getting too much or too little of what it needs to stay healthy.

If you are considering surgery to remove excess skin, a balanced diet becomes even more important and can support your body with healing and recovery.



Good to know

Although there is information available on the internet and social media, it is important to make sure you are getting correct and up to date nutritional information such as from the **British Dietetic Association, (BDA) Food Fact Sheets.**

There may also be times when you're advised to take vitamin and mineral supplements to meet your body's needs, for example, after bariatric surgery. If you have been prescribed supplements, it is important to keep taking them as advised, in addition to eating a varied diet.

You may come across supplements advertised to tighten loose skin, such as collagen. While collagen plays a key role in the structure of our skin and may offer some general skin health benefits, collagen supplements do not directly target loose skin or repair the stretched connective tissues that result from weight loss.



Moisturisers

Remember to take care of the outside of your skin, too. Hydration is important both inside and outside your body. Although there is no magic product that will fully hydrate and tighten your skin overnight, moisturisers may help plump the skin and relieve dryness right away. But if you do not keep applying them, the effects will not last.

Clothing

It may help to wear shapewear garments, as the excess skin will be supported and held tight to your new contoured body, making you feel more comfortable as you go about your everyday life. It may also support you during your recovery.



Surgery for excess skin

In some cases, it may be possible to access surgery, such as a tummy tuck (or 'abdominoplasty'), to remove excess skin.

However, as this is cosmetic surgery, these procedures are not always available on the NHS, will have specific eligibility and may need to be paid for privately.

It is also important to remember that these surgical procedures come with their own risks, such as physical health risks, scarring and recovery periods. You may also need to maintain your weight for a period before accessing treatment.

If you are considering surgery to remove excess skin, ask your GP, or weight management team to clarify what funding and treatments are available in your local area.



Further support

While everyone has their own motivation for weight loss and regaining their health, many people may want to lose weight to improve their body image, self-confidence, and self-esteem.

It can be disappointing if, even after losing weight, you keep having difficult thoughts and feelings about your body or appearance.

Many of us will have areas of our body that we do not completely like or are happy with. However, if you notice yourself having difficult thoughts or feelings about your body or appearance that are having a negative effect on your mood, relationships or day-to-day life or activities then the following suggestions may help.



- ✓ **Talk with friends and family**
This may highlight how lots of people, whatever body shape and size, have dissatisfaction with parts of their body
- ✓ **Network with other people who have had surgery**
This may help you feel less alone with this issue, reinforce that it is not your fault and help you find ways to cope
- ✓ **Think about limiting the time you spend on social media**
This may be having a negative impact on how you think and feel about your body
- ✓ **Seek professional support**
Talk to your GP or weight management team about your feelings and request additional support if available
- ✓ **Read self-help information**
See the suggestions on the next page for further information and advice on this issue. You may want to look at this with someone who supports you to think about how you can develop more satisfaction and/or acceptance about how your body has changed

Image: © Obesity Action Coalition

Resources

The following resources or support options may be helpful to you:

Obesity UK

Obesity UK is the leading charity dedicated to supporting people living with obesity.
<https://obesityuk.org.uk/>

British Dietetic Association

<https://www.bda.uk.com/food-health/food-facts.html>
<https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/healthy-eating.html>
<https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/food-facts-portion-sizes.html>

Centre for Clinical Interventions

[Building Body Acceptance \(Body Dysmorphia\) Self-Help Resources](#)

Living with Bariatric Surgery: Managing your Mind and your Weight

by Dr Denise Ratcliffe

Source(s)

1. Kitzinger HB, Abayev S, Pittermann A, Karle B, Bohdjalian A, Langer FB, et al (2012). After massive weight loss: patients' expectations of body contouring surgery. *Obes Surg* ;22:544–548.
2. Lyons, K., Meisner, B. A., Sockalingam, S., & Cassin, S. E. (2014). Body Image After Bariatric Surgery: A Qualitative Study. *Bariatric Surgical Practice and Patient Care*, 9(1), 41

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This guide has been peer reviewed by dietitians of the Obesity Specialist Group of the British Dietetic Association.

This version: January 2026.

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