A close-up portrait of a man with short, dark hair and prominent ears. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred, light-colored architectural structure.

BAT EARS

SHEETAL WALIA SPEAKS TO PLASTIC AND RECONSTRUCTIVE SURGEONS DR. MOHD RUSLAN BIN JOHAN AND DR. CHEONG YOU WEI ABOUT OTOPLASTY – WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO TREAT IT.



Plastic and reconstructive surgeon, Dr. Cheong You Wei, says that having the procedure done at a young age is highly desirable because the cartilage is extremely bendable and the child will experience positive psychological benefits from the cosmetic improvement.



Plastic and reconstructive surgeon Dr. Mohd Ruslan Bin Johan says the surgery does leave wounds but they will be well hidden with a turban-like bandage to stop bleeding or haematomas immediately after.

What happens when you are just like any other normal kid but you don't look like them? In an ideal world, you would be accepted beyond your physical appearance but in reality you could end up being a target for bullying and harassment. This is the trauma that kids with protruding ears have to live with. While prominent ears are usually referred to as "bat ears", the kids who have them are often teased with the unkind name of Dumbo – after the flying elephant with the big ears. It's not easy for a kid to hear this everyday. But there is consolation in that correcting the defect is easy enough to do.

Otoplasty on the external ear is one of the best resorts for those who are suffering from prominent ears. Otoplasty is the reshaping or reforming of the ears. Our genes largely dictate the shape and size of our ears. As such, ears can vary enormously between individuals as well as between the right and left side. In situations where the ears appear to be particularly prominent or when the shape looks decidedly out of the normal, psychological effects are often experienced.

"Generally otoplasty is performed on children with protruding and prominent ears," says plastic and reconstructive surgeon Dr. Mohd Ruslan Bin Johan. Otoplasty is more suited to children because the firmer cartilage of fully developed ears does not provide the same shaping capacity as in children. As such, it is advisable not to wait till adulthood to take steps to rectify this problem.

Timing is always an important consideration. "Having the procedure at a young age is highly desirable in two respects: the cartilage is extremely bendable, thus permitting greater ease of shaping; and secondly, the child will experience positive psychological benefits from the cosmetic improvement," says plastic and reconstructive surgeon Dr. Cheong You Wei.

THE PROCEDURE

A correction for protruding ears begins with an incision just behind the ear, in the natural fold where the ear is joined to the head. The surgeon will then remove the necessary amount of cartilage and skin required to flatten the ear against the head. According to Dr. Ruslan, the long cartilage resembles a length of bamboo and is stitched to make it bend. When an incision is necessary for the front of the ear, it is made within the natural folds so that it is hidden. The stitching done inside the cartilage is permanent.

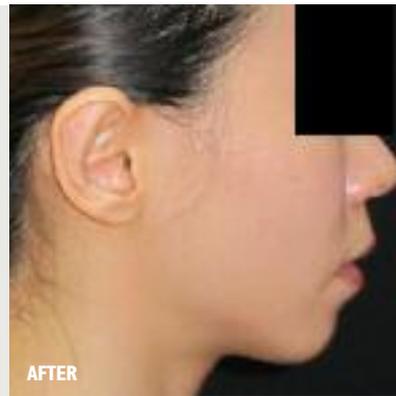
"In some cases, the surgeon will trim the cartilage, shaping it into a more desirable form and then pin the cartilage back with permanent sutures to secure it," explains Dr. Cheong. Another type of otoplasty is when the surgeon does not remove any cartilage at all, but uses stitches to hold the cartilage permanently in place. After sculpting the cartilage to the desired shape, the surgeon will apply sutures to anchor the ear until healing occurs to hold the ear in the desired position.

According to Dr. Ruslan, the surgery does leave wounds but they will be well hidden with a turban-like bandage to stop bleeding or haematomas immediately after. Dr. Cheong recommends his patients wear a special headband to stabilise the ear after otoplasty. The band does not by itself position the ear, but acts to prevent trauma to the ear and to support the healing process.

The surgery is usually done with general anaesthesia for young patients and local anaesthesia combined with a mild sedative for older children and adults. As for the recovery time for the surgery it is comparatively short compared to other surgeries because there is no muscle in the area.

ALL PICTURES COURTESY OF DR. CHEONG YUE WEI.





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There are always potential complications with any surgery but with otoplasty there are minimal risks and complications are quite rare.

"Patients are recommended to have a week's rest before they resume their normal daily activities and it's the same for kids too," advises Dr. Cheong.

According to Dr. Ruslan, it is normal for the patient to feel some side effects after the surgery, though most of these are short-lived. Many people feel sick and dizzy for a few hours after waking up from the anaesthetic. "If you are having surgery as a day patient, you should arrange for someone to drive you home and stay with you for 24 hours after the otoplasty," he advises. He also adds that if there is any long-term bleeding after the surgery, he would prescribe an anticoagulant such as aspirin to reduce the ability of the blood to clot as blood clots can block blood vessels and lead to further complications.

COMPLICATIONS AND RECOVERY

As with any normal surgery, patients will have to follow a list of dos and don'ts to help them recover from the surgery smoothly. "Simple things, such as eating a well balanced diet can be very beneficial. Quitting smoking and arranging for help with chores will improve your ability to heal quickly," says Dr. Cheong.

There are always potential complications with any surgery but with otoplasty there are minimal

risks and complications are quite rare. Bleeding during an otoplasty procedure is minimal because the skin is separated from the ear cartilage; a potential space for the collection of blood is present. Therefore, the initial head bandage is important as it pushes the thin ear skin back onto the underlying cartilage allowing it to adhere to it once again. Haematoma could occur within the first 24 to 48 hours. If this happens, quick removal of the excess blood is important, otherwise ear deformities could develop.

BENEFITS

There are many benefits to having an otoplasty, but the most important one is to improve the emotional and psychological state of mind of the patient. It is also a type of surgery that is considered safe with little or no risk involved. With natural looking results, otoplasty is the best way to correct protruding or prominent ears with very minimal downtime.

"I have seen noticeable changes in my patients after the surgery, they start looking like everybody else and that helps with their confidence and they also seem visibly happy," adds Dr. Cheong.