

Pina's weight problem called for a very drastic solution

Pina Passarelli, 43, Concord, NSW

COMFY *in my* SKIN

BEFORE

Losing so much weight left me unhappy with my body



I had so much excess skin...



...after losing 148 kilos...



...I felt unattractive

Wandering down the street, I felt exhausted. 'Hey fatty,' a man yelled out. 'Control yourself!'

Not again, I thought, turning red. At 30, I weighed 221 kilos and was often ridiculed. I tried to ignore it but it always hurt.

At 155cm, I'd been overweight all my life, but since marrying Pedro, 35, and having two boys, Gennaro, six, and Luciano, four, I had gotten even bigger.

'I'm sick of it,' I cried to Pedro. 'The weight just won't budge.'

'You're beautiful,' he smiled. 'I just want you to be happy.'

Over the years I had tried everything, from counting calories to meal-replacement shakes, but nothing worked.

Being from an Italian background, food was important to us, and as the years went on I stopped exercising too. The bigger I got the harder it was to move around.

What if my eating habits aren't the only thing to blame? I wondered. Desperate to find out, I went to the doctor. The results of my blood tests and a CT scan were a shock.

'You have a tumour pressing on your pituitary gland,' the doctor told me. He explained it was affecting my thyroid gland and metabolism.

'It's benign,' he said. 'But it helps explain your weight gain.'

I was relieved there was a medical reason contributing to my size. For years I'd thought it was all my fault. The doctor put me on a strict diet and exercise regime and gave me medication to shrink the tumour.

I was petrified I wouldn't live to see my boys grow up but the diagnosis gave me hope. I took long walks and kept a detailed food journal. However, after six months, it wasn't working.

'What am I doing wrong?' I complained to the doctor.

'The tumour isn't shrinking,' he said. 'You might have to

consider gastric-banding surgery.' The procedure would dramatically reduce my stomach size so I could only eat tiny portions.

With health-care benefits, it would cost \$5000. 'It's worth it. I want you around for a long time,' Pedro said.

'You're right,' I nodded.

A year later, in March 2002, I was ready for surgery.

'We're proud of you, Mum,' Gennaro, then 12, and Luciano, then 10, smiled.

The surgery meant only 30 per cent of what I ate - including nutrients - would be absorbed. After the op I felt relief. 'This is my second chance,' I cried. 'I won't ruin it.'

Amazingly, the results were almost instant. Over the nine days I spent recovering in hospital, I lost 30 kilos.

'You're disappearing already,' Pedro chuckled.

I was thrilled, but recovery wasn't easy. For three months I experienced diarrhoea and vomiting and ached everywhere.

After weeks of eating pureed baby foods I started an organic diet with vitamin supplements. But I was so lethargic that exercise was impossible.

Still, as the kilos dropped off, my determination grew. I started pacing the hallway, gradually rebuilding my muscle strength.

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After a year, the scales showed 100 kilos. I had lost over half my body weight!

Spurred on by my success, Pedro and I began dancing at our favourite Italian club. Incredibly, the locals didn't recognise me!

'It's me, Pina,' I said proudly.

'You look amazing!' a regular laughed. Everyone was so supportive, and we started boogieing at the club three nights a week. Eighteen months after my op I was down to 73 kilos.

I've lost 148 kilos! I rejoiced.

I was thrilled. But looking in the mirror, I felt hideous. Loose skin hung off me like curtains. The skin on my stomach was like an apron over my thighs. My arms were like enormous bat wings and my thighs drooped like giant puppy-dog ears between my legs.

I was so ashamed of my body I couldn't bear to show it off.

I'd heard plastic surgery could remove excess skin, but with my boys to look after and my father, Luciano, 85, ill, I had

other things to worry about. On top of that, Pedro and I started drifting apart.

I was devastated when Dad passed away in 2005.

'Life's too short not to be happy,' I told the boys.

A few months later, painful cysts formed along my gastric-band surgery scar. I needed an operation to remove them and my doctor suggested I get a body lift at the same time.

'I'd love to get rid of this flabby skin,' I sighed.

'Here's your chance,' he said. He was right. My body was making me so miserable I had to do something about it.

The following week I visited a plastic surgeon, Dr Mark Kohout, at his practice in Leichhardt, NSW. He'd perform my surgery the next year, with three separate procedures over six months.

Sadly, months later Pedro and I separated, making me even more determined to have a body overhaul.

I re-mortgaged the house to get \$60,000 for the operation. It was a lot, but I wanted to live my life, not hide away in shame.

On October 31, 2006, I went for my first procedure.

'Are you anxious?' Dr Kohout asked me as he drew incision lines on my torso. 'I'll be happy when it's over,' I smiled.

'You'll look fantastic,' he promised. During surgery Dr Kohout removed excess skin and tightened my bottom, stomach and upper thighs.

Recovery was excruciating. I could barely move for the pain but I knew it would be worth it.

'You can do it, Mum,' my boys encouraged.

Three months later, I went under the knife to have my inner-thigh and hip areas lifted.

'You look nice,' a man told me at the shops weeks later.

'Thanks,' I beamed.

In the third operation on April 4, 2007, I had a breast reduction, implants and my arms tightened. Overall, I had seven kilos of excess skin removed.

Recovery wasn't easy but I was desperate to see the new me buried under the bandages.

'Everything went extremely well,' Dr Kohout said.

'Thanks,' I wept. 'I've waited so long for this.'

At home, I was exhausted. Having three operations in six months took its toll and I needed antibiotics to fight infections.

By the end of May, I was finally back on my feet and ready to look in the mirror. I took a deep breath and stared nervously at my reflection.

'Wow,' I gasped. I was no longer the large, lifeless woman I'd been years earlier. I was petite and shapely. My bottom and legs were defined and my back rolls no longer gathered under my shoulder blades. I was finally happy with myself.

'You look great, Mum,'

Luciano said. My family and friends' reactions made me so confident I couldn't wait to show off my new body. I went shopping and tried on clothes I had never dreamt of wearing before.

'You look incredible,' my friends gasped.

'I'm still the same person underneath,' I reminded them. 'We wouldn't change that for the world,' they said.

Today, almost two years later, I'm a new woman. I'm so grateful for this second chance at life. With my brand-new body I can't wait to travel the world and find a kind man to share my life.

After my long journey to happiness, my body may be smaller but I still have a big heart. ■

As told to Kim Bonett

Surgery of any kind carries a risk. Before undertaking any form of weight-loss or plastic surgery do your research and always consult a reputable surgeon.

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THE RESULTS

After three operations to remove excess skin, I'm looking trim and feeling terrific. It cost me \$60,000 but it was worth every cent!



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