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Mini Facelift vs. Full Facelift: What's the Difference?

Melanie Rud | July 26, 2022



Facelifts are back—in a big way. According to a report compiled by The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, the number of facelifts performed increased a whopping 54% between 2020 and 2021. “Face lifting has made a comeback,” says Dr. Askhan Ghavami, a board-certified plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills, California, who attributes the resurgence to new surgical techniques that improve both natural outcomes and recovery times.

More generally speaking, “There’s definitely a trend of patients opting for more invasive and more complete procedures that yield long-lasting results,” adds Dr. Amir Karam, a board-certified plastic surgeon in San Diego. Facelifts offer exactly that, particularly when compared to their nonsurgical alternatives. Perhaps nothing is more indicative of facelifts’ increase in popularity than the rise of multiple new “types” of facelifts: the mini, the ponytail, the weekend. But none of these have a set medical definition; they’re marketing terms more than anything else. Still, there are some noteworthy differences among them, particularly when it comes to mini facelifts as compared to full facelifts. Ahead, doctors explain how the two differ.

What is a full facelift?

A full facelift usually addresses the lower face, jawline, and jowls, along with the midface and cheeks and possibly even the neck, says Dr. Karam. Every surgeon has their own take on it, but in a full or traditional facelift, there are incisions made in front of and behind the ear and, potentially, under the chin as well in order to access the platysmal muscle in the neck, adds Dr. Ghavani.

What is a mini facelift?

“The term ‘mini’ is typically used to indicate a smaller operation or to make it sound less invasive,” says Dr. Karam. Again, while definitions vary—even the doctors we spoke with described it differently—a mini facelift is less aggressive than a traditional one, although it’s still a major surgery. Generally speaking, mini facelifts address only the lower face, the incisions are smaller, and there’s not as much tightening of the SMAS, notes **Dr. Kimberly Lee**, a Beverly Hills, California, facial plastic surgeon board-certified in otolaryngology. (The SMAS is a layer of muscle and connective tissue under the skin.)

Mini facelift vs. full facelift: the differences

Incisions

Whereas a full facelift typically requires incisions in front of and behind the ear, in a mini, the incisions are located in only one of those spots, says Dr. Ghavani. Or they may be in the same areas, but they’ll be smaller or shorter and not extend quite as far, says Dr. Lee.

Area of the face treated

Most often mini facelifts address just the lower part of the face and not the midface. Ideal candidates have just a bit of skin laxity in this area, whereas those with heavy drooping, jowls, and deep marionette lines and nasolabial folds require a full facelift, notes Dr. Lee. She adds that full facelift patients also often need a fat transfer, to restore volume, whereas those who undergo minis usually do not.

How the SMAS is addressed

“The SMAS layer is the real workhouse of the face. If you only tighten or remove the excess of overlying skin and don’t work on the SMAS layer, you’re not going to be happy with the results in three months,” notes Dr. Lee. Still, whereas full facelifts involve some fairly invasive tightening and pulling of this layer, mini facelifts are slightly less involved: “We’re still pulling and working on the SMAS, we’re just not being as aggressive,” she notes.

Recovery time

“The advantage of a mini facelift is a quicker recovery and less downtime,” says Dr. Karam. That varies based on the exact surgical techniques, but on average, it could be about one week versus up to two weeks for a full facelift. However, it’s important to mention that the associated surgical risks aren’t also reduced. “There’s still a possibility of hematomas, seromas, and infection,” Dr. Karam cautions.

Cost

“Many people think that mini facelifts should be 50% off, but a mini facelift doesn’t involve half of the work of a full facelift,” notes Dr. Lee. That being said, minis are less expensive. According

to RealSelf data, the average cost of a mini facelift is \$7,175 as compared to an average cost of \$12,375 for a full facelift.

One is preventive, one is corrective

According to Dr. Lee, it's helpful to think about the two within this context. "Younger patients are coming to get facelifts, in an attempt to prevent some of the future aging changes that will then require more work to correct," she explains. In that instance and in the right candidate, a mini facelift can be a good preventive option. On the other hand, a full facelift addresses the entire face and lifts everything up, correcting what's happened with age and gravity, she points out.

How to decide between a mini facelift and a full facelift

Chronological age does have some bearing here, but it's not the be-all and end-all of determining factors. Generally speaking, patients in their 40s don't have as much laxity as patients in their 60s, but that's not always the case, says Dr. Lee. You could have someone who is 35 who has heavy jowling and really does need a full facelift, she says. "We always thought there was an 'appropriate' age for a facelift. But we're now seeing a lot of people who are showing signs of aging earlier," adds Dr. Karam. If someone in their late 30s doesn't get treated properly then, they will look 60 by the time they're 50, he says.

To that point, all the doctors we spoke with underscore the importance of not being married to one particular type of facelift before consulting with a plastic surgeon. "I have so many patients who tell me, 'I just need a little nip and tuck, I just need a mini,' when in reality they need a full facelift," says Dr. Lee. "Yes, mini facelifts are less expensive and less aggressive and come with less downtime. And for the right patient who just wants to look refreshed, they can be a great choice. But it's important not to fall into the 'minis are better because they're quicker and easier' trap, because they're not for everyone."

Similarly, it's best to consult with a board-certified plastic surgeon who is adept at many different types of face lifting techniques and isn't going to try to sell you on one kind that may not give you optimal and maximum results, advises Dr. Ghavani.

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