



The Dimple Life
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Dimple

Life

Eternal symbols of youth and cuteness, dimples are seducing a younger generation to go under the knife for... what exactly?

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LIKE THE YUGATAN sink-holes or those kittens with two faces, dimples are but an accident of Mother Nature. Sure, they're widely considered a facial characteristic that evokes a certain corn-fed, pastoral innocence, but make no mistake: they are a physiological malformation. Medically speaking, dimples are the result of an internal muscle – the zygomaticus major, if you're either a healthcare professional or a hypochondriac – failing to fully detach from the skin during foetal development. The result is a divot, visible when the muscle is contracted and the corner of the mouth raised: in other words, what most of us recognise as a smile.

That one physiological mishap has sprouted visions of romance, charm and mystique throughout the centuries. Chinese lore has it that dimples are lucky (although some proponents of Chinese face reading think they may signify relationship troubles in later life), and an 1866 article from *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* equated them directly to youth, despite the fact that they remain with you from womb to tomb. The Bard himself makes frequent mention of dimples in his plays and sonnets. And then there's Scarlett O'Hara, the famous literary (and later cinematic) perma-babe of the American South, who was known for hers.

Be they malformations or good omens, these small indentations leave an outsized impression. So much so that a new breed of dimple-chasers are having them surgically implanted via a relatively new procedure known as "dimpleplasty". Cosmetic surgeons such as Dr Aamer Khan have seen a modest increase in the last couple of years, including a noticeable uptick in men. "Before the pandemic we got an inquiry here and there," he says. "But since, it's been consistent. We get inquiries pretty much every week." By his estimation, it's still a relatively small group – around three to four procedures per month, mostly women, with men making up about 25 per cent of patients.

Take Johnny, a 34-year-old chef in Los Angeles. He had a dimple embedded last year to match his naturally occurring one. Growing up, he was surrounded by dimples – his mother, sister and brother all have two each – and one of his earliest memories is lovingly stroking his mother's dimples when she held him as a child. "They were comfy, charming, cool," he says. "It always gave me this heart-warming feeling."

People always remarked on his one

dimple, and he noticed a considerable increase in attention around three years ago. Women would tell him his dimple was cute, or that he was lucky to have it. He became slightly more aware of having just one – self-conscious even. So when a friend of his talked about the procedure, Johnny was intrigued. He did some research and booked an appointment with Beverly Hills' Dr Kimberly Lee, when he had saved up enough money – the procedure costs anywhere between \$3,000 and \$6,000 (though it is a little cheaper in the UK, with Dr Khan charging from £1,500 to £2,500). It was a way to mete out some sort of biological justice: it felt unfair that everyone else in his family had the symmetrical advantage.

To make a dimple, a surgeon must create a flaw in the patient's cheek. According to Dr Lee, that means making a small incision inside the mouth and adding a dissolvable stitch between the muscle and the outer cheek, causing a bit of scar tissue that will connect the two. "We're just recreating what nature would have done," she says. Or, maybe, what nature would have so beautifully messed up.

There are plenty of benefits, especially compared with more invasive appearance-altering surgeries such as nose jobs or face lifts: the procedure requires little downtime and results are pretty much immediate. One could potentially visit the doctor's surgery on a Friday and be back at work on Monday, with dimples in tow (and maybe some light bruising).

"Now that I have the dimple on the other side, I feel so much more confident and handsome," says Johnny. "I think it's added to the complexity of my expressions and helped make my smile look better."

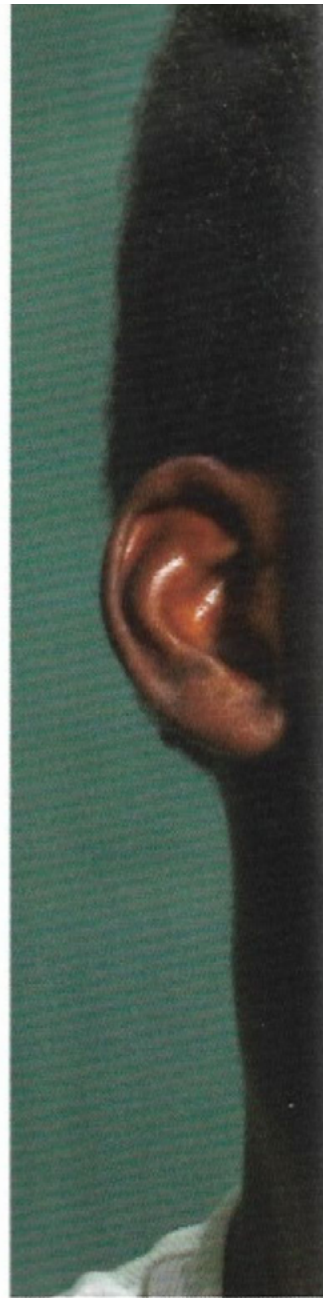
For Alan, a London-based father of two, a dimpleplasty

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was about capturing something that he'd lost. As a child, he had dimples in his chubby cheeks, but, he guesses, those faded somewhere in his 20s when he leaned out a bit. Now approaching 40, he wanted to recoup some of that youthful impishness: "People always said, 'Oh, you have such a cheeky smile.' And you get used to hearing that, until one day it stops, and you're like, Oh, I guess I don't any more."

Alan's wife had been to Dr Khan's office, and it was she who encouraged him to make the dent. For the relatively low price of £1,800, here was a chance to reclaim some of that faded glory. And the results? "It was brilliant; I'm chuffed," he says, although he did have some light bruising and swelling directly after the surgery last year. A year on, though, he's thrilled. And while he's told some of his inner circle, other people have begun to notice, too. "As I get on to 40, to have someone say I have a cheeky smile is a big confidence boost," he says. "It's nice to hear people say that."

As with any non-essential surgery, the reasons for dimple implants vary and get to something at the very heart of how we feel about ourselves. And, perhaps more importantly, how we want to be seen by others. Dr Lee says she's heard men say they want dimples in the hope of drawing attention away from a perceived flaw, like, say, a receding hairline. Or they want to mirror the dimples of their children. Others use the procedure for the more straightforward act of brightening their smile or "softening" their appearance. Similarly, Dr Khan says patients often want to improve or highlight their smiles, and that dimples are perfect for that because they draw the eye towards the mouth,



enfolding it like a parenthesis or a hug. "It extends their smile and makes it look more sincere," she says, also noting that, since the pandemic and the rise of remote work, men in particular have been actively seeking out cosmetic facial surgeries.

And while this may still be a small category in the broader plastic surgery market, the interest in dimples does hint at a shift in our aesthetic

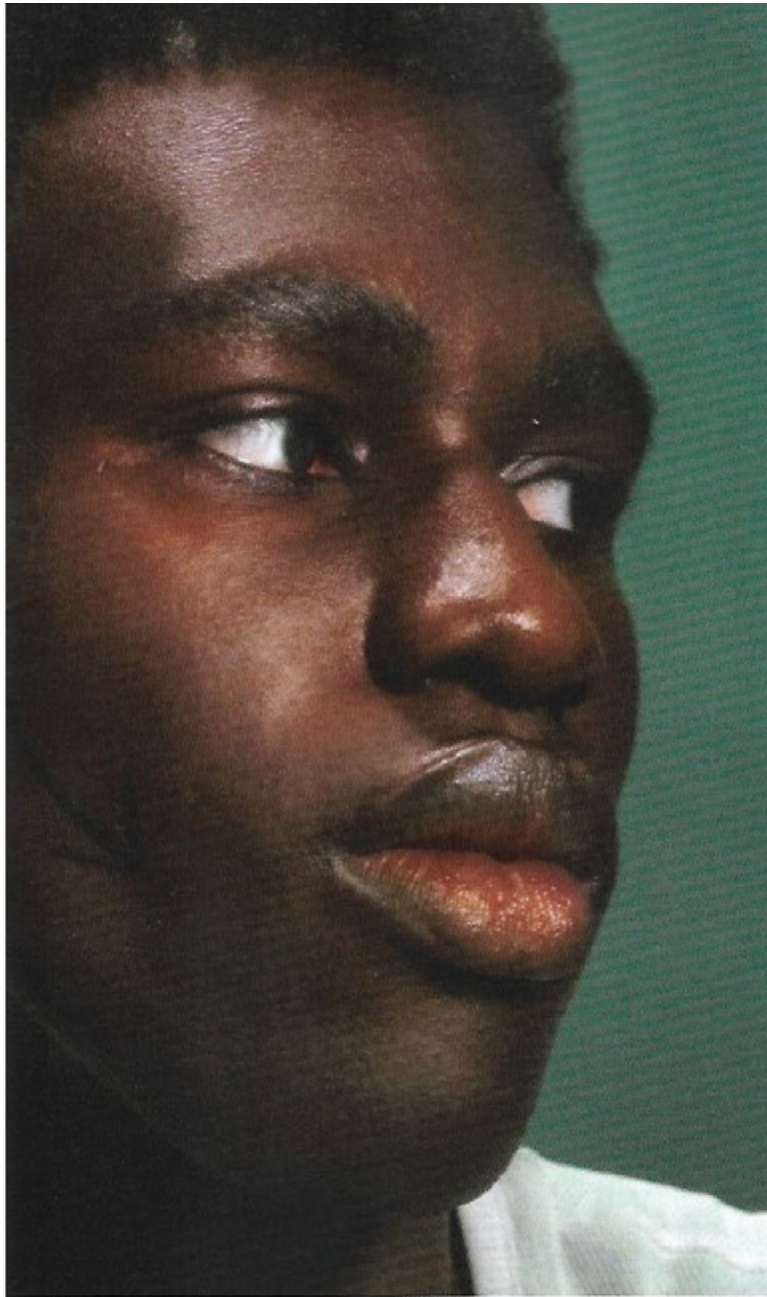


PHOTO: DEBY ZUKORA AT GUY

preference. Dimples, historically, have an undercurrent of cuteness, childlike sweetness, or even innocence – something at odds with the prevailing ideas of male handsomeness (breaking one's jaw for a stronger jawline, this is not). With these wholesome little cavities, battle has commenced between traditional gruff masculinity and Gen Z's more fluid turn to sensitivity.

"The beauty market is definitely

allowing all genders to be 'cute,'" says David Yi, author of *Pretty Boys: Legendary Icons Who Redefined Beauty* and cofounder and CEO of beauty site and product line Very Good Light. He points to some new trends from Asia having global impact: South Korea's K-pop stars promoting "soft masculinity", including make-up and hair dye, dewy skin and the Japanese concept of "kawaii", which prioritises cuteness over long-held Eurocentric beauty standards.

"Traditional ideas of masculinity are more expansive than ever," says Yi. "We're going back to a time when masculinity could be defined more liberally."



"A thing I'll often hear is that guys want a softer, gentler appearance," says Dr. Lee. "Think about someone like [US actor] Mario Lopez. It makes him look, well, cuter. Even though 'cute' is loaded and not all guys want to look cute, clients want to look more friendly and approachable." (Other celebrities frequently mentioned in the dimple conversation are Harry Styles, Jamie Dornan and Orlando Bloom. Prospective patients should be forewarned, however, that dimples alone aren't guaranteed to lead to their level of attractiveness.) Additionally, new, technologically advanced filters are helping men to experiment with changing their looks. "At a tap of your phone, you can change your eye colour, your face shape, your hairstyle, and try having dimples if you want," says Yi. "Men are considering other avenues of attractiveness, and determining it on their own terms."

Both doctors I spoke to urged caution: this surgery is difficult to undo. It would require undoing scar tissue, which is unpredictable and can be prominent in one's face, so interested parties should have a good, long think before signing up. After an assessment there is a waiting period – to deter impulsive behaviour – before surgery is scheduled. Still, people are slowly embracing the practice. "I'm doing dimples every week," says Dr. Lee. "Multiple times." Dr. Khan says that, while he doesn't think it will outpace his more popular procedures like filler or Botox, he expects demand for dimples to grow. "The more people have them, the more people see them. Add social media exposure to that and surgeons get more experience and better at the procedure."

"Ever since I started caring more about mine, I have noticed other men and their dimples," says Johnny. "They for sure look more handsome and charming."

"I do think it's nice to have a more symmetrical face," he adds. "But I'm not sure it's worth it if you don't have dimples to begin with. The money and the surgery, all to change something that you don't have at all? I don't know." ❖

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