

FAT HOPE

A silicone balloon is the latest slimming option in town



► Teo Cheng Wee

TECHNICAL technology, ballooning has now meant losing weight rather than plying on the latter.

Ask Dr Mirkin Lank, who has helped fit obese patients about 15 to 18 kg each in six months.

The consultant general, gastroenterologist and hepatologist surgeon started putting "balloons" inside their stomachs in East Stone and Mount Elizabeth hospitals from late last year.

Food specialists like himself were taught the technique by a Brazilian surgeon at a five-day workshop.

The procedure involves sliding a gastroscopy to insert a silicone balloon through the mouth and into the stomach. The balloons in these fitted with 400 to 700 ml of saline solution.

Because it takes up space in the stomach, patients experience a sense of fullness quickly when eating. Hence, they no longer feel hungry with each meal. They reduce their food intake and hence lose weight.

This procedure isn't new. About 20 years ago, surgeons had used a "gastric balloon" and filled it with air to try to achieve the same effect.

But the old balloons' design and shape made them unspectacular. They were less sturdy and more susceptible to bursting.

The deflated balloons may then go

into the small intestine and cause infections, and an operation would be required to remove it.

The new balloons are more durable and only have a 1 per cent rate of rupturing.

They were introduced five years ago and have proven popular in countries like Brazil, says Dr Jimmy Ho, a consultant at National University Hospital's (NUS) Department of Surgery.

About 20,000 patients worldwide have used this latest gastric balloon, which is made in the United States.

The procedure was brought here last November. NUS performed its first case successfully in May and the patient has shown 70 per cent of excess weight. The intra-gastric balloon is given available at Raffles and Alexandra hospitals.

The treatment is often compared to laparoscopic gastric banding, or Lap-Band surgery, which is usually performed on morbidly obese patients with a body mass index (BMI) of 35 or more above the healthy range of BMI (25 to 30). The BMI range of BMI (25 to 30) is ideal.

Lap-Band's intended effects are similar. By wrapping an adjustable gastric band made of silicone around the top of the stomach, patients feel full more quickly as well.

The weight loss, in fact, is often greater because in gastric food intake menu. Many lose up to 75 per cent of their excess weight in 18 months through Lap-Band.

The procedure has been available in hospitals here since 1998, and Dr Lank notes that a few hundred people here have gone the fit way.

But surgery comes with its share of risks. There is a 1 to 2 per cent chance of major complications like infection or blood clots when operating on obese patients, and that rose increases with the weight of the patient, says Dr Lank.

Furthermore, patients have to be watched for three to five days after Lap-Band. Those using the balloon need

► Endoscopic intra-gastric balloon



DR JIMMY HO, Raffles Hospital

only stay overnight in the hospital.

It only requires about 15 minutes of general anaesthesia to insert the balloon, and another 20 minutes when the balloon is removed six months later.

Over 10 patients will suffer vomiting, abdominal cramps and discomfort in the first few days, but these side-effects usually subside.

The balloon is removed before the stomach starts to stretch.

Using the gastroscopy, a special string is pushed into the balloon to suck out the saline. Gradually, the balloons are then used to pull out the balloon. No surgery is required.

Even for the cultured obese, few obese patients (BMI between 27 and 37) can opt for the balloon.

The procedure is also helpful for the very obese, who can choose to use the balloon first to bring down their weight — and the risk — before going for surgery.

Although the feeling of hunger

should return when the balloon is removed, Dr Lank says most patients can maintain their new weight because they've been "reprogrammed" to eat smaller portions.

"Having lost the excess weight, it's also easier for them to exercise and be more motivated to keep their weight down," he says.

NUS charges between \$10,000 and \$12,000 for the intra-gastric balloon, while it costs about \$4,000 to \$4,500 at East Stone and Mount Elizabeth hospitals. Lap-Band costs between \$10,000 and \$12,000.

But don't expect doctors to approve the procedure just for anybody because the risks are too.

"We'll advise patients to try, dieting and pills first," Dr Lank says. "And we won't be inserting the balloon into their people who just want to be thinner."

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Slimming down

MYTAN wasn't always fat.

As a young man, he weighed around 70kg. It was only in his 20s that he really gained weight because of the constant over-eating in his sales job.

As he became a hefty 120kg, then dropped his weight to 90kg three years ago through exercise, but ballooned back to 120kg when he was put on a course of hyper-tension and cholesterol drugs which reduced his metabolism, he says.

The 40-year-old father of three, who does not want to reveal his full name, was disappointed that he could not spend time with his family because of his obesity.

"Whenever I go shopping with them, I am very quiet. I have to sit down to apply an apple 100 and grab a cup of coffee instead," he says.

Worried about his weight at his age, the 170cm-tall sales director decided to have the intra-gastric balloon placed in his stomach in April this year.

"This has curbed his appetite and he now eats less than he used to. What he used to be, like three meals a day, he has consistently lost 1kg per week in the last 100 days."

Although the balloon will be removed in another three months' time, he's confident that he'll be motivated enough to maintain his new weight.

Already his lighter frame has earned many benefits. He has been taken off most of his medication, he no longer gets joint pains while exercising, and he can now sleep soundly through the night.

"I used to wake up five or six times a night because of my snoring. I couldn't rest well and would feel fatigued the whole day," he says.

The new frame no longer needs to agonise into many medical appliances such as a stair-step toilet and a shower chair. He can now buy clothes off-the-rack. In fact, he has a favourite set of his children. They have no idea that a new child in his weight doesn't have toting.

"By of course, they don't know about my balloon procedure," he says.