

Social and clinical reasons in patients who undergo labiaplasty surgery

Labiaplasti ameliyatı yapılan hastalarda sosyal ve klinik nedenler

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ABSTRACT

Aim: Although an increasing number of women in developed societies prefer genital plastic surgeries, the most common procedure is considered to be labiaplasty. The aim of this study is to reveal the social and clinical factors that cause the decision to operate in women undergoing labiaplasty.

Materials and Methods: In our study, 189 patients who had labia minora reduction surgery in our hospital between April 2018 - 2023 were evaluated retrospectively. The social and clinical factors that caused all patients included in the study to request surgery from the hospital database from their patient files were evaluated retrospectively.

Results: Patients participating in the study; Patients who underwent surgery for aesthetic reasons, aesthetic + functional reasons and psychological reasons were evaluated in 3 separate groups, and no significant difference was found in the average age between the groups ($p=0.914$). In our study, among the patients without a history of coitus, 16 (88.9%) patients were operated for individual reasons and 2 (11.1%) patients were operated for environmental reasons. The rate of operations performed for individual reasons in patients without a history of coitus was found to be significantly higher than the rate of operations performed for environmental reasons ($p<0.001$).

Conclusion: Women who undergo surgical intervention do not always do so for individual reasons. Therefore, it is necessary to make a comprehensive evaluation before considering labiaplasty surgery. A clear understanding of labiaplasty patients' motivations and expectations will facilitate better patient decision-making and increase the patient's likelihood of satisfaction with the result.

Keywords: Genital aesthetics, labiaplasty, body dysmorphic disorder.

ÖZ

Amaç: Gelişmiş toplumlarda giderek artan sayıda kadın, genital estetik ameliyatları tercih etmekle birlikte en yaygın olan prosedür labiaplasti olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı labiaplasti operasyonu geçiren kadınlarda operasyon kararına neden olan sosyal ve klinik faktörleri ortaya koymaktır.

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Gereç ve yöntem: Çalışmamızda Nisan 2018 - 2023 döneminde hastanemizde labia minör küçültme ameliyatı olan 189 hasta retrospektif olarak değerlendirildi. Araştırmaya dahil edilen tüm hastaların hasta dosyalarından hastane veritabanından ameliyatı talep etmelerine neden olan sosyal ve klinik faktörler retrospektif olarak değerlendirildi.

Bulgular: Çalışmaya katılan hastalar; estetik nedenler, estetik + işlevsel nedenler ve psikolojik nedenlerle ameliyat olan hastalar olarak 3 ayrı grupta değerlendirilmiş olup, gruplar arasında yaş ortalaması olarak anlamlı fark saptanmamıştır ($p=0.914$). Çalışmamızda koitus öyküsü olmayan hastalardan 16 (%88.9) hasta bireysel nedenler, 2 (%11.1) hasta çevresel nedenlerden dolayı opere olmuştur. Koitus öyküsü olmayan hastalarda bireysel nedenlerle yapılan operasyon oranı, çevresel nedenlerle yapılan operasyon oranına göre anlamlı yüksek saptanmıştır ($p<0.001$)

Sonuç: Cerrahi müdahale geçiren kadınlar bunu her zaman kişisel nedenlerden dolayı yapmamaktadır. Bu nedenle labiaplasti operasyonunu düşünmeden önce kapsamlı bir değerlendirme yapmak gerekir. Labiaplasti hastalarının motivasyonlarının ve beklentilerinin net olarak anlaşılması, hastanın daha iyi karar vermesini kolaylaştıracak ve hastanın sonuçtan memnuniyet olasılığını arttıracaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Genital estetik, labiaplasti, vücut dismorfik bozukluk.

INTRODUCTION

Although an increasing number of women prefer genital aesthetic surgeries in developed societies, the most common procedure is labiaplasty (1, 2). Hypertrophy and/or asymmetry of the inner lips may cause functional, aesthetic, and/or psychosocial concerns in some adolescents and adult women (3). Labiaplasty is conducted particularly with aesthetic motives and is frequently introduced as a technique used to improve female's physical appearance (4-6). However, patients who have unilateral or bilateral labia minora enlargement may express complaints of discomfort, inflammation, dyspareunia, improper personal hygiene throughout the menstruation, and difficulties using a self-urinating catheter (7, 8). Many females who have asymmetry or hypertrophy of the labia minora also report higher self-awareness, anxiety or embarrassment, or increased sensations of abnormality when wearing tight clothing or in sexual settings (5, 9). This has led to increased demands for plastic surgery of the inner lips (4-11). Labiaplasty can improve the appearance of the labia in many women and additionally offer functional and psychological advantages (4-11). Labiaplasty is a cosmetic procedure that is becoming more and more common in our country. The study conducted by Herbenick et al. revealed that women who want to have labiaplasty are affected not only by functional concerns but also by external factors (12). A study that was conducted among university-graduate women reported that 4.2% of women experienced psychological problems including negative body image, anxiety,

and loss of self-confidence (12). This is the reason why a thorough assessment is important for women who request labiaplasty before proceeding with the surgery. The purpose of this current investigation was to uncover the social and clinical factors that cause the decision to operate in women undergoing labiaplasty.

MATERIALS and METHODS

The present study was designed in a retrospective observational design following the principles of Helsinki declaration. Informed consent documents were received from all patients and the study was started after receiving ethics committee approval (2024/259) from our hospital's Ethics Committee. A total of 189 individuals who had labia minora reduction surgery in our hospital from April 2018 to 2023 were evaluated retrospectively in the present study. The social and clinical factors that caused the individuals accepted in the research to request surgery were evaluated retrospectively from the clinic database and patient files. The age, education level, and lifetime sexual partners of all patients were questioned. Their requests for surgery were categorized into 3 groups as aesthetic reasons, psychological reasons, and aesthetic + functional reasons. Aesthetic reasons were defined as lips being larger than normal and/or asymmetrical. Functional causes were defined as patients who described pain during intercourse and frequent vulvovaginitis symptoms. Psychological reasons were defined as a lack of self-confidence during sexual intercourse. The patients were asked whether the reason for the surgery was because of their own

needs or whether they were affected by other people including sexual partners, relatives, close companions, or the press. The relationship between the demographic data and the factors causing the surgery was evaluated.

Statistical Analysis

SPSS 26.0 (IBM Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) was employed for the statistical analysis. The normality of the distribution was evaluated with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. The Mann-Whitney U-Test was utilized to analyze the not normally distributed parameters, and the Chi-Square and Fisher's Exact Tests were used in the analysis of the categorical data. The One-Way ANOVA Test was employed to test whether there were statistically significant differences between the averages of the independent groups. The quantitative data of the patients were given as Mean±Standard Deviation (SD). The qualitative data were presented as percentages

(%) and numbers. The scores were considered at a 95% Confidence Interval (CI). The p-value was regarded statistically significant when it was <0.05.

RESULTS

The average age of the participants in the research was 30.7±7.4 years. Those who participated in the study were evaluated in 3 separate groups as those who underwent surgery for aesthetic reasons, aesthetic + functional reasons, and psychological reasons. No significant difference was found in the average age across the groups (p=0.914). The patients who participated in the study were evaluated in two separate groups as those who underwent surgery for individual reasons and environmental reasons. No significant difference was detected in the average age across the groups (p=0.085) (Table-1).

Table-1. Evaluation of the relationship between the reason for the operation and age.

Reasons for Surgery	Age Mean±SD	p
Aesthetic reasons	30.9±7	0.914
Aesthetic + Functional reasons	30.7±7.3	
Psychological reasons	30.2±7.2	
Individual reasons	29.8±6.9	0.085
Environmental reasons	31.6±7.3	

Table-2. Assessment of the relationship between the reason for the surgery and the presence of coitus.

Reasons for Surgery	Coitus (+) n - (%)	Coitus (-) n - (%)	Total n - (%)	p
Aesthetic reasons	49-(28.7%)	5-(27.8%)	54-(28.6%)	0.249
Aesthetic + Functional reasons	99-(57.9%)	8-(44.4%)	107-(56.6%)	
Psychological reasons	23-(13.5%)	5-(27.8%)	28-(14.8%)	
Individual reasons	83-(48.5%)	16-(88.9%)	99-(52.4%)	<0.001
Environmental reasons	88-(51.5%)	2-(11.1%)	90-(47.6%)	

Table-3. The assessment of the relationship between the reasons for the surgery and the level of education.

Reasons for Surgery	University n - (%)	High school n - (%)	Total n - (%)	p
Aesthetic Reasons	26-(34.7%)	28-(24.6%)	54-(28.6%)	0.013
Aesthetic + Functional Reasons	33-(44%)	74-(64.9%)	107-(56.6%)	
Psychological Reasons	16-(21.3%)	12-(10.5%)	28-(14.8%)	
Individual	34-(45.3%)	65-(57%)	99-(52.4%)	0.077
Environmental	41-(54.7%)	49-(43%)	90-(47.6%)	

Among the patients who had a history of coitus, 49 (28.7%) were operated on for aesthetic reasons, 99 (57.9%) were operated on for aesthetic + functional reasons, and 23 (13.5%) were operated on for psychological reasons in the present study. Among those who did not have a history of coitus, 5 (27.8%) were operated on for aesthetic reasons, 8 (44.4%) were operated on for aesthetic + functional reasons, and 5 (27.8%) were operated on for psychological reasons. No significant differences were detected in terms of the reasons for surgery between the groups ($p=0.249$). Among those who had a history of coitus, 83 (48.5%) patients were operated on for individual reasons, and 88 (51.5%) were operated on for environmental reasons. Among those who did not have a history of coitus, 16 (88.9%) patients were operated on for individual reasons and 2 (11.1%) were operated on for environmental reasons. In patients who did not have a history of coitus, the ratio of surgeries conducted for individual reasons was significantly greater than the rate of surgeries performed for environmental reasons ($p<0.001$) (Table-2).

Among the university-graduate patients, 26 (34.7%) patients were operated on for aesthetic reasons, 33 (44%) were operated on for aesthetic + functional reasons, and 16 (21.3%) were operated on for psychological reasons. Among those who were high school graduates, 28 (24.6%) patients were operated on for aesthetic reasons, 74 (64.9%) were operated on for aesthetic + functional reasons, and 12 (10.5%) were operated on for psychological reasons. The rate of patients who underwent surgery for aesthetic reasons was found to be significantly higher in the university graduate group ($p=0.013$). Among the university graduate patients, 34 (45.3%) patients were operated on for individual reasons and 41 (54.7%) were operated on for environmental reasons. Among the high school graduates, 65 (57%) patients were operated on for individual reasons and 49 (43%) were operated on because of environmental reasons. There was no significant difference in the reasons for surgery between the groups in terms of individual and environmental factors. ($p=0.077$) (Table-3).

DISCUSSION

As far as we found, this current study is the first research investigating the motives for undergoing

labiaplasty in Turkey. A variety of elements can lead to Labia hypertrophy (e.g., congenital conditions such as labia asymmetry, repetitive pulling, or infection). The results of the present study demonstrate that the main reason why our participants resorted to labiaplasty surgery was both functional and aesthetic concerns, followed by functional reasons and psychological concerns, respectively. It has been revealed that women who describe their labiaplasty experiences request surgery because of media influence, negative comments and experiences, and physical and functional dysfunctions. Rouzier et al. reported in their study that most patients applied for surgery because of aesthetic complaints, followed by discomfort during clothing and exercise and dyspareunia (5). In a prospective research with 33 patients with psychological or physical problems, Crouch et al. discovered that the majority of the complaints had to do with functional pain or appearance (2). 4.2% of participants, according to Herbenick et al., experienced psychological issues including anxiety, low self-esteem, and unfavorable body image. The majority of individuals in this current investigation were highly educated and 81.4% were university graduate women (12). However, Herbenick et al. thought that there was no correlation between female genital self-image and educational background. (12). In the present study, 39.6% of the patients were university graduate women. Sharp et al. reported that the most commonly cited reason for surgery was the look of the labia, and relationship status had a significant influence on women's decisions to have surgery (13). Similarly, it was shown that 90.4% of the women in the present study had sexual partners, and 12.6% of the women who had sexual partners were affected by their partners. Furthermore, Sharp et al. reported that these ladies shied away from love connections and they were anxious because of their sex companions' reactions to their labia's appearance. In Veale et al.'s research, most of women stated that they decided to undergo surgery, usually because of a negative experience with a former sexual partner (10). Although some comments may be considered objective, it is clear that some of them were misinterpreted (10). These negative comments regarding lip appearance seem to cause emotional distress resulting in behaviors including not using tight clothes and/or swimming suits and staying away from studies on medicine

such as smear tests (4). Bramwell et al. performed a retrospective-qualitative investigation to analyze the expectations and experiences of 6 women who underwent labiaplasty surgery and reported that Every woman firmly followed societal norms and believed that their genital look was "weird" (14). Ackard et al. published the findings of a survey on sexual activity, body image, and self-image that was answered by 3627 women. They discovered that greater levels of sexual pleasure were linked to positive self- and body images (15). Nevertheless, not much study has been done on their relations, for this reason, it is possible to speculate that women are less likely to experience sexual pleasure if they perceive dissatisfaction with their bodies (15). For this reason, possessing a lovely or "standard" vulva could help to experience better results (15). In the present study, 47.6% of the patients who underwent labiaplasty were operated because of environmental factors. As the reason for surgery, the rate of psychological problems accounted for only 21.3% of the patients; however, all these psychological problems were affected by external elements, which shows that sexual partners and the media affect women's motivations for surgery. The effects of media on aesthetic understanding and culture are undeniable. However, it must be emphasized that the vulva does not have a standard appearance. The media's exposure to photographs of female genitalia makes people more conscious of their looks. The internet and advertising may conjure up images of a "normal" genital look, misleading women into thinking that surgery is necessary to get the desired appearance. The majority of the patients in this research were young women, with an average age of 30.7 ± 7.4 . Also, 21.1% of the patients reported that they were influenced by the media. Many studies are reporting that the reason for the rising demand for labiaplasty is the media (13, 15). However, there are also several studies reporting the influence of online photos on females' decisions to have labiaplasties (16, 17). In the present study, consistent with the literature data, patients reported that their primary source of knowledge on labiaplasty was the internet. In their study, Markey et al. examined the motivations of young females' desire for plastic surgery and came to the conclusion that body dissatisfaction played a role in the aesthetic desire and that individuals had a higher propensity to internalize media messages on

issues with physical appearance (18). According to Sharp et al., the assessment of labiaplasty was impacted by media exposure and contextual factors that affect genital appearance dissatisfaction. But because this study was carried out in a social setting, the results may have been influenced by the sociocultural context (17). Prior research indicates that reasons for having a labiaplasty might stem from both environmental factors and personal desires. In their study, Lowenstein et al. suggested that before considering labiaplasty, their patients should be sent for a consultation with a psychologist or psychiatrist for a thorough examination (19). Additionally, they noted that females who thought that having a labiaplasty surgery would boost their self-esteem may be more likely to feel self-conscious about their vulval look if they were told inaccurate information regarding certain morphological traits (19).

Also, the Cosmetic Surgery Committee of the International Society for the Study of Vulvovaginal Disease (ISSVD) recommended that body dysmorphic disorder must be considered and that surgeons should seek a multidisciplinary expert opinion in cases where they were unsure (19). Another theme that emerged was about women's reasons for having labiaplasty. Debates over the importance of labiaplasty get a lot of interest from the scientific and medical communities as well as the general public (20). Females who participated in many previous studies seemed to be aware of this topic and showed a lot of effort in voicing their reasons for undergoing labiaplasty. As reported in some previous studies, almost all women who were interviewed reported that they had physical and aesthetic concerns about the inner lips (2, 13). In Gimlin et al.'s interview study conducted with patients who underwent labiaplasty, women expressed their aesthetic concerns to a lesser extent because they thought that their decision to have labiaplasty might be considered superficial or shallow by others (21). In the present study, unlike the results of this study, patients freely expressed their desire for surgery because of aesthetic concerns, and the rate of surgery performed for aesthetic concerns was significantly higher when compared to the literature data. In the research conducted by Bramwell et al., some women emphasized their physical symptoms more than their appearance concerns when they described their discussions

with their doctors (14). This is particularly valid for females who access labiaplasty through a public healthcare system (14, 22). This distinction could not be made in our study because the present study was a multicenter study based on both public and private hospitals. The women contacted for this study usually showed high levels of satisfaction with the look and functionality of their inner lips following surgery, as has been observed in earlier studies on labiaplasty (23, 24). Additionally, this change in how they felt about their genitalia demonstrated a rise in general self-assurance and self-worth, which is in line with qualitative research on other forms of plastic surgery (25, 26). Though they were pleased with the enhancement in their genital look, over half of the ladies who participated in the interviews stated that it was not as "perfect" as they had hoped. It was evident from the descriptions provided that these ladies thought their inner lips should look perfect, much like the "after" pictures of labiaplasty they read on doctors' websites. While our interviews with these individuals did not expressly address body dysmorphic disorder, research indicates that some women who are considering labiaplasty may be suffering from this condition. When women seek labiaplasty, clinicians must check for signs of body dysmorphic disorder (24). After receiving cosmetic procedures, the majority of people with body dysmorphic disorder reported

no improvement or deterioration of their symptoms (27, 28).

CONCLUSION

In Turkey, females are having more and more labiaplasties. Many patients are motivated by their sexual partners and the media, and many want surgery for both functional and cosmetic reasons. Not every woman who undergoes surgery does this for merely individual reasons. For this reason, a complete evaluation is necessary before considering labiaplasty surgery. It could be crucial for doctors and patients to talk about how the patients' genitalia might look following surgery to reduce the likelihood of patient dissatisfaction overall. Most females are happy with their labiaplasty outcomes, which often means improvement in psychological and sexual health. However, the expectations of women are not always met, especially when they take into account how it will affect their sexual interactions. Clinicians may be able to interact with women seeking labiaplasty more successfully as a consequence of the study's findings. Better patient decision-making will result from a thorough grasp of the goals and expectations of individuals undergoing labiaplasty and increase the likelihood of satisfaction of the patient with the outcomes.

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