

My dress size halved with a **GASTRIC BAND**

After having a gastric band fitted two years ago, Alison Basford has not only regained her figure, she has reclaimed her life

ALISON, 44, who is a doctors' receptionist, lives in Stafford with her husband Pete. They have four children, Adam, 22, Danny, 20, Christopher, 18, and Katy, 15.

If you'd asked me two years ago what I'd be wearing to my eldest son's wedding this August, I'd have said, "Whatever will fit." At a size 20, there isn't much choice, and I certainly didn't want to stand out from the crowd, so I tended to go for dark colours. I never dreamed, therefore, that I'd be wearing a vibrant cerise pink dress – or that it would be in a size 10!

My weight problems really began after I started having children, because, although I lost the weight after my first born, after the second and third, it was more difficult. I'm 4ft 10in so any weight gain shows. I'm also an emotional person, and when I'm down, I turn to food. It became a vicious circle where I'd comfort eat to feel better, but end up feeling guilty and low again.

By the time I became pregnant with my youngest, Katy, I'd reached my heaviest of 14½ stone. I was embarrassed by the way I looked. I didn't want my husband to hold my hand in town because I was ashamed for him to be out with me, and at my job at the surgery, the thought of having to walk through the waiting room in front of patients made me squirm.

I tried every diet going and once lost 3½ stone, but like all the other times, I gradually started eating again and the weight piled back on. Soon my size was affecting my health – I was on tablets for



Above: Alison weighed over 14 stone. Now, she's slimline and happy

high blood pressure, and was breathless and tired all the time. Pete and the kids, of course, loved me the way I was, so whenever I told them how unhappy I felt, they said I didn't need to change. I went to my GP several times for help and was told that people put too much emphasis on weight and that I shouldn't worry. However, it got to the stage where I was seriously depressed.

Then, two years ago, a friend who also had a weight problem had a gastric band fitted on the NHS. She was slightly bigger than me, and when I started to see the weight fall off and her confidence grow, it gave me hope. I was 13 stone then, with a BMI of 37, but when I went to my GP, he told me I wasn't eligible for a

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gastric band on the NHS because I wasn't big enough.

It was such a blow. I went home and sobbed, and when Pete tried to console me, I begged that we take out a loan to pay for a gastric band privately. Pete was worried about the health implications but agreed we should at least investigate it.

I did a search online and made an appointment to see Dr David Ashton at Healthier Weight in Birmingham. He agreed that I was eligible at my weight and size. We talked through the process and he explained how, although it was quite a complex operation, it was relatively low risk. He explained that he would insert an adjustable silicone ring around the upper part of >>



personal story

my stomach, which would be filled with fluid to create a small pouch about the size of a golf ball. This would be about five per cent of my whole stomach volume and was designed to fool my brain into thinking I'm full more quickly. There were possible side effects – regurgitation of food, the band slipping or leaking – but nothing overly dangerous, so Pete and I decided to go ahead.

We took out a loan for £7,000 to pay for the operation. I had to follow a liquid diet for ten days before, but this wasn't hard because I so wanted it to work.

The actual operation lasts only about half an hour and was less traumatic than I imagined. It was a laparoscopy, which meant I had five small incisions in my stomach. I was one of the last to have this method – today, they tend to do just one incision through the navel. I was told I'd have tummy pain for three or four days afterwards, and was given painkillers, but I was on such a high from having it done that I didn't notice the pain. I was discharged the next morning and back at work a week later – I just couldn't drive and lift things for a few days.

For the first three weeks, I was only allowed liquids – but that was okay as I found I wasn't hungry any more. It was as though my appetite had disappeared, and with it my desire to eat. After that, I was told I could move on to puréed food for seven weeks before starting to eat normally again. When I went back to the clinic for a check-up and weighed for the first time since the operation, I'd lost 12lbs! I was ecstatic.

Over the next few months, I continued to lose weight. Dr Ashton had explained that a band was not a solution to my problems but a tool, and that I had to work with it by eating more healthily and not snacking. This takes willpower, but I was so determined to succeed.

Two months after the op, I bought a size 16 fitted dress for my work Christmas party. When I walked in, everybody gasped – I felt good about myself for the first time in years. I've now lost 4½ stone and my weight has started to stabilise. If I wanted to lose more, I could return to the clinic and have more liquid



Left: Before the operation. Above: with her supportive husband Pete

added to my band through a syringe to further restrict my appetite, but I'm happy with my shape and size.

A gastric band isn't the easy option, though. There are foods that I struggle to digest now – bread, for example, which is common among patients, although everyone has their own list of difficult foods. I'm lucky that I'm able to have a varied diet, but I do take a vitamin tablet every day to guard against any nutritional deficiencies. I also have to eat slowly because otherwise my food can come back up. When I go out for dinner, I'll often just have a starter or a children's meal, and while I do still have the odd treat, it's nothing like I used to because I want to look after what I've achieved.

Physically I'm more active and walk a lot – now when I'm with Pete in town, he

has to tell me to slow down! I finally feel normal, which is all I ever wanted. When I was big, I had no self-esteem. Now, I'm so confident, and have even trained to become a smoking cessation advisor. I hold my own clinics twice a week and love it – it's something I would never have

dreamed of doing before.

My friends and family are so proud. All the way through my weight loss, Pete told me how great I looked, but he'd still say he had loved me as I was before. But now that he sees how confident I am,

he's delighted. He says it's like having back the girl he first met, which is kind of true; before surgery, I felt years older than my age, and now I feel like a twentysomething again.

Healthier Weight, 0800-0731146; healthierweight.co.uk.

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Gastric bands: what you need to know

+ Who can have one?

Private clinics ask for a BMI greater than 35. Those with BMIs of 30 and over may be eligible if weight is a problem. On the NHS, it is usually only recommended as a last resort for those with a BMI of over 40 or with a BMI of between 30 and 40 who also have a condition such as diabetes, high blood pressure (hypertension)

or heart disease. Gastric banding may be too risky for people with heart or lung conditions.

+ Do they always work?

There is about an 85 per cent success rate. It is possible to eat through a gastric band and this is the principle cause for failure.

+ Is it risky?

No operation is risk-free, but gastric band surgery is relatively low risk, with

complications only in one in every 1,000.

+ Does it leave scarring?

The operation usually involves one incision through the belly button and scarring is minimal.

+ Can it be removed?

Yes, but they are considered long-term solutions. Two-thirds of patients who have their gastric bands removed will regain the weight. **w&h**

Nature's gastric bands, see page 137 ▸