

Gastric operation helped Helen to lose eight stone and get her life back. Nicky Findley reports



AFTER: Helen Wooldridge has lost eight stone

# It was worth the weight

**E**VEN for an experienced body builder, lifting 45 kilos of iron in the gym is no mean feat. But this is the same weight Helen Wooldridge has been carrying around with her for nearly 30 years.

It was only after she underwent gastric surgery just 12 months ago that she managed to lose the eight stone that was threatening to cut her life short.

The 55-year-old hairdresser from Christchurch, is one of a growing number of people to undergo the stomach stapling procedure through the NHS.

The operation known as bariatric surgery is approved by The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (Nice) as a suitable treatment for the morbidly obese – people who are over 45 kilograms or about seven stone over their ideal weight.

Health experts see it as cost-effective compared to the expense of treating obesity-related illnesses like heart disease, cancer and diabetes which is estimated to cost the NHS in excess of £1.7 billion a year.

"It has changed my life," says Helen who weighed 22 and a half stone at her heaviest and is now 14 and a half stone. Her dress size has dropped from a size 28 to a 16.

"I have always been big. I was a big baby – I weighed 10 and a half pounds and looked about six months old when I was born.

"My mum took me to the doctor when I was about three years old but he just said I was a big girl and would probably always be big."

Throughout her teens Helen had to diet just to stay a size 16 but when she married at 20 the pounds started to pile on.

"I was a typical yo-yo dieter. I would lose two stone and put three back on. I'd thought about surgery as a friend of mine had a gastric bypass about three years ago, but I just didn't think I could go through with it.

"I didn't really want to admit to myself that I was big. It was a flight to Rome that really brought it home as I couldn't get the safety belt around me and there was no way I was going to ask for the extended belt."

Helen was also on a cocktail of pills every day for diabetes which was gradually getting worse as well as medication for high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

But following her operation a year ago this month at Streamline Surgical, her diabetes has gone and she is no longer on any medication.

"It was key-hole surgery so there were just six tiny cuts - I was in and out of hospital in just three days," she explains.

"I had a bit of discomfort for

first two weeks after the operation but I was back at work three weeks later."

The operation performed by consultant Tim John involves surgical staples creating a pouch in the upper part of the stomach and a section of intestine being removed. It means the patient can only eat small meals and food is absorbed less easily into the body. Helen was left with 20 per cent of her stomach.

"I still enjoy my food but you can't eat too much sweet stuff. I was a real chocoholic – but now if you eat too much you feel really ill. I had half a sachet of drinking chocolate and I felt sick and tired for about two hours."

Helen adds that the operation should be seen as a last resort.

"It's not just a case of having an operation and then that's it. You still have to work it.

"I go to the gym three times a week now – until last year I hadn't even set foot in one before but I really enjoy going.

"I am still losing weight although the weight loss has slowed down now.

"But I feel so much better – it really is one of the best decisions



BEFORE: Helen weighed 22 stone at her heaviest

I have ever made - I feel as though I have got my life back."

A spokesman for National Obesity Forum said: "Anyone considering the procedure (which can cost from between £6,000 to £12,000) should be made aware of all the possible complications and side-effects because you are literally bypassing the stomach and all the digestive processes that go with that."