Surgery Without Scars

By Dr. Ranit Mishori

A revolutionary surgical technique allows doctors to remove an appendix or gallbladder with virtually no cutting or scars, and minimal pain. Instead of an incision, the doctor gets to the site through the body’s natural cavities, such as your mouth. You need only light anesthesia, and the faster recovery lets you go home the day of your operation.

Called NOTES® (Natural Orifice Translumenal Endoscopic Surgery®), the new approach to surgery is still in the experimental stage. However, NOTES already has been tried successfully in the U.S. In one case, doctors inserted a tube down the esophagus to make a small cut in the stomach that allowed them to extract a gallbladder.

The procedure is being studied around the world as a way to simplify obesity surgery, gynecologic procedures, and diagnostic techniques such as biopsies of the liver and other internal organs. The method is a step beyond endoscopic surgery, which allows special instruments or a camera to be inserted through tiny cuts in the skin to carry out procedures inside the body, thereby minimizing risks and discomfort. In comparison, NOTES will leave no visible scarring and will likely hurt even less.

The technology is still not quite ready, and some questions need to be addressed before NOTES becomes a common procedure. For example, body openings don’t provide sterile environments. So, what is the risk of spreading infection from the bacteria that live in these natural cavities?

Doctors also will require significant training to master a whole new level of surgical adroitness. As for patients, the notion of their upper or lower body openings serving as surgical passageways will take some psychological adjustment. “It’s one thing to push a baby out of there,” quipped a mom I know. “But the thought of ‘birthing’ my appendix is a whole other issue.”