

Transforming Bodies and Lives

For Robert Wegner, M.D., of the Saint Francis Center for Surgical Weight Loss, helping patients lose weight through bariatric surgery is both a powerful calling and a personal privilege.

Before he was a doctor, Robert Wegner, M.D., was a 20-something bodybuilder and personal trainer in a downtown Chicago gym. He loved it all—the sweat and the strength, the goals set and met—but nothing mattered more to him than seeing his clients find better health through fitness. When an infertility center hired him to coach individuals who were morbidly obese and struggling to conceive, he began to realize just how important his work was.

“As I saw these men and women lose weight, get pregnant, and have babies, I was inspired,” Dr. Wegner recalls. At 30, he entered medical school, followed by a surgical residency and bariatric surgery fellowship. “Bariatric surgery is safe and effective,” he says. “I knew that by becoming a bariatric surgeon, I could help so many more people get healthy and reclaim their lives.”

In 2010, Dr. Wegner was recruited to lead the Saint Francis Center for Surgical Weight Loss at Saint Francis Hospital in Memphis. Since then, he has performed nearly 6,000 gastric bypass or gastric sleeve surgeries—considered to be gold-standard procedures for individuals who are morbidly obese—and helped his patients achieve stunning results. Today, Dr. Wegner is widely considered the most experienced bariatric surgeon in the Mid-South.

A Journey to Health

People who are considered morbidly obese are at least 100 pounds over their ideal body weight. Long-term effects can include Type 2 diabetes, sleep apnea, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, gastric reflux, infertility, a higher risk of cancer, and a lower quality of life.

“When a surgeon removes a gallbladder, it cures one problem. When I operate on my patients, I’m potentially curing so many more,” says Dr. Wegner. “There’s no better feeling.”

Both gastric bypass and sleeve procedures are performed laparoscopically and reduce the size of the stomach so patients feel full faster. But this isn’t a quick fix, cautions Dr. Wegner. Patients undergo rigorous pre-op screening and demonstrate their commitment to what will be a huge life change. Post-surgery, in tandem with a carefully monitored diet and exercise program, patients lose weight rapidly and soon find themselves engaging in activities they haven’t done in years: running, traveling, or just roughhousing with kids and grandkids.

Aside from his clinical skills, Dr. Wegner is beloved by his patients for his boundless compassion and empathy. Their successes, he says, are deeply fulfilling. One Thanksgiving, he got a call from a patient. The woman said she was on a plane, about to take off to visit her family, and, for first time in years, she hadn’t needed to request a seatbelt extender.

“I have devoted my life to helping my patients get their lives back through these incredibly safe and effective procedures,” Dr. Wegner concludes. “This is not cosmetic surgery; this is lifesaving surgery.”



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