

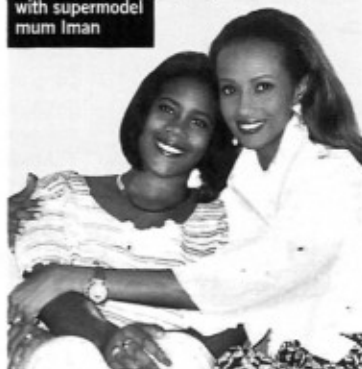
◀ to eat as much any more." She looked at me with an expression that said being hyper-vigilant about her daughter's diet had never been pleasurable. "I had to watch your weight as a child," she said. "Your paediatrician told me that you were going to be obese when you were four years old. At four, she knew!" She turned around and continued cooking, but I was stunned. What was my mother supposed to do with that information? She'd tried her best, I realised. As a child, I'd been angry with her. Now my compassion for her nearly had me in tears.

Thanks to all my pre-surgery counselling and visits to a nutritionist, I ate slowly and enjoyed the food my mother prepared that afternoon for what it was: nourishment for my body, fuel to keep it moving. It wasn't a remedy, a quick fix. A week later, I had gastric bypass surgery. I had complications and was checked into intensive care, needing more surgery. The typical hospital stay after gastric bypass is two days. I left after a week, still over 23st and feeling discouraged.

That soon changed. A month after my surgery, I was back at work and 20lbs lighter. Other people couldn't see the difference, but I could feel it. Before the surgery, a reasonable portion left me feeling deprived; I was always thinking about the next meal. After the surgery, good food in moderation



Zulekha aged eight (above); with supermodel mum Iman



was unbelievably satisfying. To feel that way and lose weight so quickly was exhilarating and strange at the same time. Six months on, I was another 80lbs lighter. For the first time in my life, I didn't have to shop in a plus-size store. (Yay, H&M!)

## LESSONS LEARNT

A year and a half later, and my body has settled at 11st 8lb and a size 12. I jumped in the shower one morning, and it dawned on me that I hadn't crept out of bed in months. The 'aha' moment that had changed my life was just a memory.

It's hard to explain how it feels to lose so much weight so fast. I tell my friends it's like becoming famous overnight – suddenly all eyes are on you. But there's more to it than that. The difference between Overweight Zu and Slim Zu is like being a fluffy cat, then being shaved. Being naked feels *really* naked. I'm slender, but there are lots of folds and limpness where the voluptuousness used to be. No amount of clever lighting can disguise the fact that my breasts fall to my abdomen when I take off my bra, and men want to know why.

The old me was unabashedly voluptuous and sexy, no explanations necessary. In fact, when I was a size 30, men approached me. Now when I walk into a room, guys really pay attention to me but the sad fact is that the volume hasn't improved the quality. Most of the men who talk to me now aren't men I would consider. Recently, a guy at a jazz club was staring at me for so long, I had to ask if we knew each other. He explained that he was trying "to get drunk enough to get up the courage to talk to you". Sorry, but liquid courage is not what I'm looking for in a man. Like it or not, being 23st-plus weeded out the losers who were too superficial to approach me.

Perhaps it's just this kind of attention that has given me a deeper appreciation for my mother's beauty. Now I realise it's so much more than her appearance. What people respond to is her grace and elegance, her independent thinking and charity for others. Looking back, the lesson that a woman's worth can never be found on a scale is one that I have known all along. I'm proud of the fact that at 23st, I didn't hide from life, and I didn't let my weight define me. At 11st 8lbs, I don't do that either. ☺

## Gastric bypass surgery: what you need to know

By Dr Ahmed R Ahmed of the Bupa Cromwell Hospital

**What does the operation do?** "Using tiny incisions, a pouch the size of a golf ball is created in the stomach. The small intestine is cut and joined to the new stomach, making the digestive system shorter. Food travels through the tiny new stomach directly into the small intestine, thus bypassing the original stomach. It's relatively pain-free and the result is a smaller appetite and feeling full quicker."

**Who is suitable?** "Surgery is usually recommended only if diet, exercise and medicines haven't worked. In the UK, anyone with a BMI of 40 or over should be eligible for a free operation on the NHS. Anyone with a BMI between 35 and 40 is only eligible if they have other serious medical conditions."

**How long is the recovery?** "Patients are generally up and walking within two hours after the operation and can usually leave the hospital two days later."

**Is it effective?** "Extremely. Average weight loss is 30%. It's known to resolve type 2 diabetes and lower cholesterol, blood pressure and the risk of cancer."

**Are there risks?** "Yes, as with any surgery, but on the whole these are minimal."

For further information about weight-loss surgery, visit the British Obesity Surgery Patient Association at [Bospa.org](http://Bospa.org) or call 0845 602 0446