



RECONSTRUCTION: Plastic surgeons say they expect the number of people looking to fix their enlarged ear lobes to rise. Surgery to close such gauged ears could cost about \$3,000 for both sides, and involves using the patient's own tissue. PHOTO: TAN YING CHIEN

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# Some go under the knife to close gauged ears

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WHEN Faiz was 24, he got curious about "gauged ears"- ear piercings which can be the size of a 50-cent coin or larger.

"I wanted to try it for myself," said Faiz, who used cone-shaped equipment called tapers to stretch the holes in his ear lobes.

But some years later, when he tried to find a job as a trucker, his stretched ear lobes - which had holes the size of bottle caps - hurt his chances.

"I went to six interviews and didn't get a job. This was even with recommendations and five years of experience," he said. "Interviewers just gave me that look."

Two years ago, he spent about \$3,000 to fix his lobes.

Private plastic surgeons whom The Straits Times spoke to said that over the last three years, they have each seen about three cases of people looking to fix their enlarged ear piercings every year, and they expect the numbers to rise.

"Most of our locals who enlarge their ear lobes tend to be relatively young," said The Sloane Clinic's Tan Ying Chien. "They would seek such surgery only when they start looking for proper jobs, and most of them may still have not reached that age."

Changi General Hospital has done about five such surgical procedures a year in recent years, said its ear, nose and throat consultant, Ian Loh.

Gauged ears, if not cared for diligently, can be infected, doctors say. A mix of sea salt and water is used to prevent this.

Human resource experts say that enlarged ear holes, also known as "flesh tunnels", could be a hurdle in the chase for jobs, especially front-end ones unrelated to the nightclub and creative industries.

"Employers usually associate such symbols with nightlife," said David Leong, managing director of human resource firm People Worldwide. "But it boils down to individual employers' values."

However, jobs are not the only reason for people repairing their ear lobes.

When student Luke, 22, went for national service, he could not wear any accessories to keep his stretched piercings in place.

"They ended up looking saggy and deformed," said Luke, who stretched his piercings to look like stars from his favourite bands. The art student went for surgery last year.

Both Faiz and Luke did not want their real names used, because of the stigma they felt was associated with gauged ears.

Disapproval from spouses or even in-laws has led others to go for surgery. "My most memorable case was that of a young man getting married," said Dr Loh. "His potential father-in-law... insisted on him getting the ear lobe repaired before the wedding!"

Surgery to close such gauged ears could cost around \$3,000 for both sides. It involves reconstructing a normal ear lobe with the patient's own tissue.

"The only side effect might be a small scar, which fades over time," said Leo Kah Woon, a doctor who practises at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre.

Faiz, now 34 and a trucker, said the surgery has made a huge difference in terms of making a first impression.

"Previously, parents would keep their kids away from me when they saw me at the playground," he said.

"Gauged ears are ultimately an individual's choice, but if you really want to try it out, consider family, friends and your job prospects too."