

A woman with long brown hair and bangs, wearing a bright red, short-sleeved, V-neck dress, stands on the right side of the page. She is smiling and has her left hand on her hip. The background is a green clipboard with a silver clip at the top and a pencil lying horizontally across it. The title 'My whole body has transformed' is written in large, bold, red letters on the left side of the clipboard.

My whole body has transformed

Two years ago, 31-year-old Sabina Piljek had soaring blood pressure and weighed 115kg. She decided to have a gastric band placed around her stomach and is now 37kg lighter and much happier. Here, Sabina shares how the operation drastically altered her life. By Pip Harry.

"I've struggled with my weight since I was a teenager – I've tried every diet under the sun, but the weight always crept back on. I was very unhappy, self-conscious about going out and I didn't even bother with relationships. I've always been an emotional eater – if something difficult was happening in my life, I would eat for comfort. I also found exercise really boring and would find any excuse not to do it.

"Two years ago my dad read an article about gastric banding and he brought it up with me as a possibility, as he knew I was struggling. At the time I thought maybe I wasn't big enough to qualify. But my blood pressure was going up and my GP suggested it as well. That's when I thought, 'I should really look into it'.

"Medically, I was a good candidate. I have a family history

of hypertension, diabetes and heart problems and my BMI was in the obese category. I always thought I was overweight, but when someone says to you that you're obese, it really hits home.

"A friend recommended Circle of Care, a gastric banding clinic. I made an appointment and after carefully going through all the pros and cons, I decided to go ahead.

"I didn't tell anyone apart from my immediate family. I didn't want to fail, or have people watching me and thinking, 'Should she be eating that?' My other concerns were having a foreign object in my body and the cost. I didn't have private health cover and the procedure was \$16,000. I was so lucky my parents stepped in and paid for it. They said to me, 'If this is what you really want and it's going to make you happy and healthy, we are all for it.' ►



"I did a day stay in hospital and the procedure took about 60 minutes under general anaesthetic. The surgeon made five small incisions in my abdomen. He then wrapped a gastric band around the upper part of my stomach using keyhole surgery. This creates a small pouch above the band, which acts like a new stomach.

"Having the band meant I could only eat small amounts of food and I would feel full afterwards. The band is also connected to an access 'port', which is implanted under the skin and allows the doctors to either tighten or loosen the band.

"When I woke up from the procedure, I was very groggy. The next day was the worst. I was in pain, but had to walk around because my doctor didn't want me to develop blood clots. I took a week off work to recover. I usually sleep on my stomach, but I couldn't with the band, so that took some getting used to.

"Following the procedure I was on a liquid diet of V8 juice, Optifast shakes and mum's clear soups. Some days I really had to force myself to drink, so that I didn't get dehydrated. After two weeks I progressed to small amounts of mush, like mashed potatoes or pumpkin, about six times a day – no more than a few spoonfuls at every meal. I wasn't feeling hungry and I didn't actually want to eat because I was still in pain.

"I saw a dietitian who helped me identify foods that were difficult to eat and what I needed to eat to stay healthy. Breads are extremely hard to eat with a band, as well as steaks or

any dry food. I find myself eating lots of salads, which go down well, and I have to be very careful to chew my food properly.

"At week four I had my first 'fill' of the band to make it a little tighter. This is where they stick a needle into the port and fill the band with a saline solution that reduces the stomach. You can get a fill when you start feeling as if you're able to eat more than you should. Or you can get some of the solution removed if you feel it's too tight and you can't eat enough.

"I do have some ongoing issues. I'm supposed to eat at very regular times throughout the day – six small meals. But if I'm busy I sometimes forget and then I'm starving and I just shove something in my mouth and it gets stuck in the band.

"I knew that I had to change my whole outlook on food and how it's incorporated into my life"

"Typically, I have a very healthy diet now. Breakfast is around 30g of cereal, then I'll have yoghurt or a piece of fruit for morning tea. Lunch is half a can of tuna with some Vita-Weats and tomato, then I'll have fruit or a nut bar for a snack. My staple dinner is steamed vegies or a salad with a small piece of meat. Having said that, it can be really easy to go off track. I don't deny myself a small amount of chocolate every now and again, but chocolate, chips and ice-cream can go down so easily, making it all too easy to fall into the trap of eating the wrong foods.

"I dropped a lot of weight in the first 12 months, and in the last year I've lost about 8kg. But I didn't ever think the band was going to be a magical cure. For me, it was important to use the band only as a tool for weight loss. I knew that I had to change my whole outlook on food and how it's incorporated into my life.

"I saw a counsellor who helped me deal with the emotional ties I had to eating as well as for some ongoing anxiety issues. She gave me some great strategies for coping.



"Now, I also use exercise to help me cope with stress instead of bingeing. Hitting the gym is my new release. About six weeks after the procedure I started seeing a personal trainer twice a week, and I now train up to six times every week and love it.

"My whole body has transformed – the difference is just amazing. Before I was just round, now I actually have shape! My blood pressure is normal, I have more energy and I'm more confident and happy. My family are so proud. My dad says I'm his investment and he's gotten a good return."

for more info The Australian Institute of Weight Control has a network of surgical clinics around the country specialising in laparoscopic weight-loss surgery for the obese. For more information, visit www.gastricbandingsurgery.com.au. ♻️