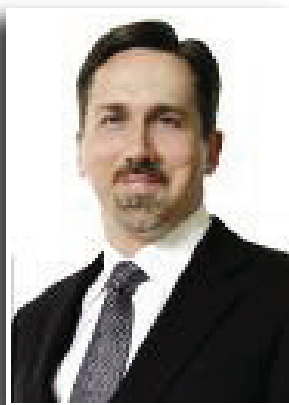


# Steps to Achieve Arms that Reach Out and Grab

Peter W. Bray, MD, MSc, FRCS(C)

*“Mommy, when you wave bye-bye your arm waves back”*



**W**ith arrival of warm, summer weather most people feel the need to expose more of the upper arm and shoulder regions. Indeed, most would feel uncomfortable being confined to long-sleeves on a

hot day. But the appearance of the upper arms is a common source of concern for many people causing self-consciousness and awkward clothing restrictions.

The arms are prone to accumulation of fat but also develop folds of loose, floppy

skin that tend to hang off the back of the arm when raised. This change in shape has acquired the common and rather unfortunate nicknames of, “bat wings” or “bingo wings”. As with excess skin in other areas of the body their formation is aggravated by major fluctuations in weight. But the relatively thin, inelastic skin of the upper arm area combined with the ever-present effects of gravity makes such “wings” a common problem even in those with stable, healthy body-weights.

But even though the summer months have passed many people continue to feel dissatisfied with the appearance of their arms. Bare arms are certainly more ubiquitous in the summer but the need to expose them does not always disappear with the arrival of fall.

***Some of the issues my patients have shared with me include:***

- “I hate the way my arm flaps when I serve at the tennis court. My opponents call it, “Shake ‘n Serve”.
- “I have to wear a sleeveless dress at my niece’s wedding next spring. Maybe I can wear a shawl to hide my arms”.
- “I’m self-conscious when exercising at the gym; my arms make a gust of wind when I work-out on the Nautilus”.

These scenarios hint at the different concerns that can motivate patients to seek improvement in their arms and are important to consider when creating a treatment plan. Several considerations, outlined below, will help to put such a plan into place.

## **Step 1 – Consultation**

A formal consultation with an experienced plastic surgeon is a good way to learn about some of the relevant treatment options. This meeting should also help to clarify your

continued on next page

goals and objectives and work them into an individualized treatment plan.

Your Plastic Surgeon will also ask about your tolerance for scars and take a detailed medical history. Although cosmetic treatments for arms are typically very safe for healthy people, certain conditions like smoking and diabetes require more careful management prior to surgery in order to minimize risk of complications.

### Step 2 – Review Treatment Options

“I’m working out 4 days per week, lifting weights, and I just can’t get rid of my floppy arms”.

I always recommend clients attain a stable, healthy, sustainable body weight prior to any form of body-contouring surgery. The addition of weights or resistance training gives the added benefit of improved strength and muscle contour. But neither weight loss nor muscle toning will tighten up loose skin. Consequently many people notice little benefit to their “bat wings” with weight loss and exercise; spending more time at the gym will not solve the problem. In considering treatment options I break the goals down into those that achieve fat removal, skin tightening, or a combination of both.

### Fat removal



Liposuction has become the most popular technique for removal of excess fat from many body areas, including the arms.

Through several small, easily concealed incisions the fat is removed by a fine cannula resulting in decreased thickness of the fat layer and reduced bulk of the treated area. This form of “traditional” liposuction can be a useful tool in those patients with good skin tone and moderate fat accumulation. Patients in this group tend to be younger and with minimal excess skin.

By the time a client reaches the “bat wing” stage traditional liposuction is typically a poor treatment option. Because the skin has limited ability to tighten after surgery, treatment with traditional liposuction will likely just “deflate” the arm further and aggravate the problem of loose, floppy skin.

Some newer energy-assisted liposuction techniques, however, hold promise of fat removal but with better skin-tightening effects. Ideally such solutions allow a minimally invasive method for improvement of arm contour in patients who would have otherwise required a formal skin excision, like a brachioplasty (discussed below). My pre-

ferred such technique is BodyTite™ liposuction, using computer-controlled application of radiofrequency energy. Research reports have show skin contraction results of 30-40%, compared to approximately 10% for conventional liposuction.

Patients who undergo liposuction of the arms generally enjoy a fairly rapid recovery. Mild discomfort, swelling and bruising are to be expected afterward but light activities are possible within days. As for other areas treated with liposuction a compression garment must be worn for 4-6 weeks after surgery. This garment is something like a long sleeve cycling top but can be worn under other clothing.

### **Skin Tightening - “Arm lift” surgery (brachioplasty)**



Just as a tummy tuck achieves removal of excess abdominal skin an arm lift, or brachioplasty, performs a similar function for the upper arms. This procedure is often combined with liposuction for additional contouring but is much more effective at tightening the upper arm. The excess skin is

removed using an incision along the inner aspect of the arm leaving tighter remaining skin and improved contour.

The main downside of a brachioplasty is a permanent scar on the inner aspect of the arm. This scar begins in underarm area and extends for a variable distance toward the elbow. The greater the amount of loose skin to be removed the longer the final scar. Like any scar the appearance certainly improves over time but never completely disappears.

In some cases the presence of this scar creates something of a “Catch 22”; a client restricts exposure of their arms because of the bat wing appearance and after surgery might restrict exposure because of the visible scar. Has any meaningful benefit actually been achieved?

To assist a client with this question I often draw the anticipated location of the scar on the upper arm during the consultation. They may then try on clothing at home and with different arm positions allowing for a more informed final decision.

Naturally the recovery after a brachioplasty is longer than for liposuction. Discomfort afterward is still well-controlled with oral pain relievers but patients should expect a longer period of activity restriction, usually a few weeks where only light arm activity is possible.

### **Step 3 – Decision making**

Hopefully after completion of these initial steps you will be better able to make an informed decision about rejuvenation of the arms. The final decision to proceed with treatment will have to be incorporated into your lifestyle in order to allow sufficient time for preparation and recovery.

Your Plastic Surgeon should be able to respond to questions to your satisfaction and serve as a valuable resource to facilitate and ease the treatment process.