You want to change your look a little — maybe fill out your cheeks, plump up your lips or smooth out the profile of your nose — but you want to check the look out first before you commit because you want to be sure it’s right for you.

So, what’s a girl to do?

One option you have is to “test drive” the look with a temporary filler before you actually decide to undergo a permanent procedure.

Joseph Niamtu, III, D.M.D., a board-certified cosmetic facial surgeon in Richmond, Va., says that, while rare, there is a place for such test drives.

“Occasionally, someone will come in and say, ‘I think I want my lips done, but I don’t want to look like Angelina Jolie.’ We can inject saline solution in the lips — it’s very fast, lasts for about an hour, and gives the patient a pretty good idea” of what to expect by simulating the look, but not the feel, of a permanent procedure.

Even though using fillers for test drives is relatively rare, it does have its place, Dr. Niamtu notes. First, he says, it can give you a good idea of what to expect if you proceed with a permanent filler or implant.

And second, and perhaps more importantly, it gives you a safety net to decide that a look is not for you before you undergo a more permanent procedure.

First impressions
With any procedure, it’s important that a patient’s expectations are as reasonable as possible.
For this reason, Dr. Niamtu says, “Before I do a lip implant, I always do a filler first. People get impulsive and impetuous, and maybe jump into something they won’t like in the end. I tell them if they like the look they get with the fillers, then we can proceed with an implant.”

If you want your chin or cheeks changed, Dr. Niamtu says the surgeon can show you the potential end result using an implant as a template. The surgeon traces around the implant on your skin, then injects that area. This gives you a preview of what look a particular implant will provide.

Even if you have a hump in your nose, a temporary filler can give you an idea of whether or not you want surgery to correct the hump. While a temporary filler “obviously won’t reduce the hump,” Dr. Niamtu says, “it does give the impression of doing so. The same can be said for fillers’ use to check out the look for upturning the tip of the nose, for instance. It’s not actually changing the shape, but rather giving an impression of what an end result would look like.”

Of course, there are other options available for you to test drive a look, but none of them are foolproof, Dr. Niamtu stresses. In addition to using temporary fillers or saline to see how you would look, computer-imaging software is frequently used as a noninvasive mode of showing before and after images.

**Filler foibles**

How can you feel assured that your “preview” look represents what your actual result will be?

“I don’t think you can, totally,” Dr. Niamtu notes. “Even with computer imaging, I’m creating a ‘computer cartoon.’ If I tried, I could make anyone look like the Mona Lisa.” Computer imaging is popular and noninvasive, while an injection requires you to undergo a procedure. But at least with a filler test drive, you see the potential in real-time, and it’s “a fairly reasonable facsimile.”

There are also instances in which Dr. Niamtu would advise against filler test drives. No doctor should ever use a filler to try and sell a permanent procedure. If you feel that a doctor uses a temporary filler to try and convince you to undergo another procedure, find a different doctor.

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**Great Expectations**

*Is a picture worth a thousand words?*

Seeing is believing — and where cosmetic surgery is concerned, that can be a problem in setting your expectations.

Advances in technology have made it possible to “try out” different cosmetic procedures and to see what you could look like with a change in weight, hairstyle or color using available software programs. For instance, you can upload your own picture to a tool such as LiftMagic to get an idea of how you might look after a certain procedure.

LiftMagic (Modiface Inc.) is a free online system where anyone can upload his or her picture and “try on” various cosmetic procedures — with the possible results shown on that individual’s picture.

However, one of the challenges that both patients and surgeons alike face is managing expectations of actual real-life outcomes.

“Although Modiface is not meant to replace the tools being used by plastic surgeons in their clinics,” explains Parham Aarabi, Ph.D., CEO of Modiface Inc., and professor and Canada Research Chair, University of Toronto, “it aims to address all of those ‘what if’ questions that people have.”

Dr. Aarabi further explains that “…Our tools were fun and interactive visualizations for anyone to try, but not guaranteed or 100 percent accurate visualizations. After two years and over a million people having used our tools, I am glad that most of our users have understood exactly what our technology is and what it can and cannot do.”

He explains that surgeons have always had to manage patients’ expectations, and advances in technology don’t change that. “We simply provide a visual answer to anyone’s ‘what if’ questions. We do not aim to sell any particular surgery or procedure. Our tools fall mainly in the pre-consultation path, where our automated single-click solutions allow people to try different cosmetic procedures, weight changes, hairstyles and colors, and so forth.”

Ultimately, patients need to remember — and perhaps be reminded — that outcome is in the hands of the surgeon and the patients’ individual circumstances — not the software.
Dr. Niamtu also says it’s a red flag for him “if a patient has so much trepidation and so many reservations that she can’t get comfortable with the idea [of cosmetic surgery].”

According to him, you need to be sure that you’re ready to undergo cosmetic procedures. It’s a big decision, and there are financial considerations that come into play.

**Scotch tape surgery**

Dr. Niamtu also uses several other techniques to simulate surgical results. “Placing clear tape on several areas of the brow then lifting and placing the other end of the tape on the forehead can simulate a brow lift,” he says. By arranging the tape pieces, one can “adjust” the brow lift to the patient’s liking.

“I have additionally done similar ‘Scotch Tape Surgery’ with protruding ears. You can simply tape the ears back a given distance to see how the patient likes the result.”

These techniques may sound low tech, but Dr. Niamtu has sent more than one person home with tape-lifted brows or taped-back ears.

“It has actually been a useful adjunct,” he says, “although the person in the next car at the stoplight may do a double take.”

In the end, Dr. Niamtu says, test driving a cosmetic look may not be necessary for most people, but “for someone who is normal and well-adjusted, who doesn’t have body dysmorphic disorder or other psychological issues, the use of temporary fillers to try out a look can be a very viable and useful tool.”

So, is it for you? Ultimately, that’s for you and your surgeon to determine. But it’s an option you can employ to make educated decisions about how you want to proceed — or not.