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SARAH BROWN:
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Can you buy a better body?

THE PROMISES SOUND GOOD - FAT-ERASING, THIGH-SHRINKING, CELLULITE-BUSTING... BUT DO THE LATEST TREATMENTS REALLY DELIVER, ASKS ALICE HART-DAVIS

The other morning, I found myself at a clinic watching a young woman having the fat sucked out of her inner thighs. It wasn't liposuction but mini-lipo, a miniaturised version, if you like, during which the patient is awake, and which uses a very small cannula (metal tube) to sculpt and suck out the fat. It all sounded terrific on paper: no general anaesthetic, virtually no downtime – almost what you might call 'lunchtime lipo'.

The reality was a bit of a shock. Like the doctor and nurse, I was wearing surgical scrubs. The patient, who was 32, was relaxed and chatty as the doctor injected large quantities of liquid anaesthetic into the area that he would be working on. But watching the patient's flesh puff up, blanched and distorted, as bruises began to form around the edges of the anaesthetic, I felt distinctly queasy. When, an hour later, the doctor began – slowly, carefully – to extract the fat, which whizzed along the long tube attached to the cannula and began to accumulate, along with a mixture of blood, plasma and anaesthetic, in the collecting jar, I made my excuses and left.

It's not pleasant, but I need to do this sort of thing every now and again. Otherwise, it's all too easy to fall into the trap of thinking that non-surgical procedures aren't so much of a big deal.

'People seem to think these non-surgical, or semi-surgical, treatments are all very straightforward, and they're not,' says Dr Tracy Mountford of The Cosmetic Skin Clinic, Stoke Poges. 'The misconception is that because patients don't need a general anaesthetic, and treatments are not done in a hospital, they are risk-free. That is not correct. They involve downtime and considerable bruising and they carry similar risks as surgery, such as infection and complications.'

There's now a baffling range of procedures on offer in the UK, each one making great claims to streamline bodies. All are technically non-surgical, though not all are non-invasive. None are cheap. Some are better accredited than others – because the UK lacks the stringent regulations in place in the US, new fat-busting machines, like new injectable fillers, can quite legally be trialled here. Should you be tempted to try an exciting-sounding treatment, make sure you're not a guinea pig for a procedure that has yet to prove its worth in clinical trials.

And how good are these treatments, anyway? 'In my opinion, there is still no treatment for cellulite that works permanently, despite any amount of media hype,' says Rajiv Grover, plastic surgeon and president-elect of the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons.

'My concern regarding many of the newer treatments that break down fat, but do not aspirate it [remove it by suction] is that their effect will be very limited as they rely on the body to remove that fat. Treatments which do aspirate the fat give better results, but are not trouble-free, either, as there is the risk of skin irregularities from the trauma of the cannula.' And that means ridged or bumpy flesh.

'I think a lot of these treatments should be performed only by surgeons,' says Dr Mountford, of the procedures often done by cosmetic doctors – highly specialised, but not with surgical training. The 'mini liposuction' techniques Vaser, SmartLipo and BodyTite, for example, are all fairly major treatments. They can have very nice results, but they can run some risks.'

Also, as Mr Grover points out, no methods of surgical and non-surgical fat removal are suitable for patients who are overweight. They're best for those who are at or near their ideal body weight, but have stubborn areas that do not shift.

'Removing fat will to some extent leave the overlying skin deflated,' says Mr Grover. 'Although many treatments claim to be able to tighten skin, there

is no better way of achieving this than the slow loss of fat, which occurs with dieting and exercise. This allows the skin to contract naturally, and the increased blood flow of exercise stimulates collagen production and better skin tone.'

My view? Be cautious. We all want a quick fix – that's human nature – but these latest quick fixes come at a price. ❧

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