

# Liposuction:

## Safety still paramount; not every patient a candidate



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It was just 25 years ago that liposuction was first performed in the United States, but it has become one of the most commonly performed cosmetic procedures in the country.

Within a few years of its introduction here, dermatologist Jeffrey Klein, M.D., San Juan Capistrano, Calif., developed the tumescent technique, which was quickly acknowledged as the safest way to perform the procedure.

Liposuction has generated its share of controversy, as some physicians and surgeons in a variety of specialties pushed the envelope to see how much fat could be removed at any single time, or combined liposuction with more invasive surgical procedures, thereby raising the risk factors.

More than 300,000 liposuction procedures have been performed annually over the past few years, and, considering the speed with which the procedure was introduced and developed in the 1980s, On Call wondered about the current trends.

We talked with dermatologists about some of the issues getting publicity in liposuction today. For example, recently, a plastic surgeon in Texas drew attention for performing liposuction on a morbidly obese 12-year-old. Since liposuction is not defined as a treatment for obesity, On Call wondered how dermatologists view that case.

### Moderate evolution

Gary Barsky, M.D., of Elmhurst, Ill., who has been performing liposuction for 20 years, says, "No news is good news."

"The safety has been improved and complications are much less. It's become so frequently done, and there are a lot of guidelines and standards available, that if people are following those and they choose patients carefully, it should be a relatively safe, and not such a newsworthy, procedure."

Dr. Barsky says a few innovations have been introduced but have also been slow to catch on.

"We have Ultrashape from Israel, and they are using sound waves to dissolve fat. I've learned in my 28 years that it takes several years to find out, first of all, how to use a technique or equipment, and even longer to find out how safe it is.

"They are injecting phosphatidylcholine, which is an emulsifier, in different parts of the world, but it hasn't been approved. Medical groups are saying, 'Let's wait and let it be tested first.'

"Ultrasonic liposuction came out several years ago, and some doctors use it in tough areas. But I don't see any advantage to it. I do like the vibration-assisted liposuction, because it oscillates so gently, it won't even break the skin; it is just quicker than your hand can move, and it saves motion."

### Evolving techniques

With 11 years of liposuction experience, in Torrance, Calif., Susan Goodlerner, M.D., says new devices are always being promoted, and says that, to her mind, safety is a primary issue.

"A few years ago, I observed the ultrasonic liposuction, but decided against it. The cannulas were a lot larger, and I saw some adverse effects from the treatment.

"I've heard about the laser-assisted liposuction. But even at the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery (ASDS) meeting I didn't hear much about it. Sometimes a procedure is promoted by a manufacturer, but doesn't hit the mainstream."

Dale M. Abadir, M.D., of Rye Brook, N.Y., learned liposuction in Paris in the early 1980s.

He says he hasn't been impressed with the ultrasonic liposuction technique, either.

"The first time I saw that, I was absolutely horrified, because you're adding a tremendous amount of extra risk you don't need, with the potential for the patient to get burned. The heat is supposed to make it all come out easier, but I'm not a tremendously strong man, and with the tumescent anesthesia, saline softens the fat. I've never had any trouble getting it ... so I don't know why you would even consider it."

Gregory Nikolaidis, M.D., in Austin,



**Dr. Nikolaidis**

Texas, says he does like using Thermage® with liposuction.

"In my experience, Thermage® contributes to additional skin contraction. So, for me, the next step might be adding heat

from the inside to see if it would help the tissues contract even more."

### Safety considerations

Dwight Scarborough, M.D., Dublin, Ohio, and Moorestown, N.J., reiterates the need for assuring the safety of the elective procedure and advocates the avoidance of general anesthetic.

"The other issue is cannula size. If you look at complications, a small percentage

arises from perforations. We've stayed with the 4 to 6 mm cannulas. I am not a fan of the 2 to 3 mm cannulas because they're so small, I think a puncture rate can be significantly increased.

"The pendulum swings. In the late '80s, very large cannulas (8 to 10 mm) were employed. The pendulum swung way back over the decade, down to 2 to 3 mm, but I think the mainstream is about 4 to 6 mm today."

### Crossing the line?

With the general feeling that liposuction, when done within the guidelines, is a safe procedure, On Call wondered what dermatologists think of the surgeon in Texas who performed the procedure on a preteen who was nearly 100 pounds overweight.

"In my opinion, anything younger than 18 is too young," Dr. Nikolaidis says.

"Some people would argue that even patients in their 20s are continuing to develop, from a pediatric standpoint."

Dr. Abadir, assistant professor at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, N.Y., and a practitioner for 33 years, has little patience with the idea of liposuction as an alternative to sensible eating and exercise habits.

"Is the girl going to improve her eating habits? This whole idea that 'I don't need to diet, I can just get my fat suctioned off' is just a disaster.

"But if she's morbidly obese and could benefit from having fat removed, just so she can get more active, maybe they are doing her a favor. That's one of those situations we just have to watch and see how it works."

"Sometimes a procedure is promoted by a manufacturer, but doesn't hit the mainstream."

— Susan Goodlerner, M.D.  
Torrance, Calif.

### More than age

Dr. Scarborough, assistant clinical professor at Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, and adjunct clinical professor at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York, has additional concerns.

He speculates that if the girl resumes previous eating patterns and her weight balloons up again, it could result in a dysmorphic body shape. But, he says age is not necessarily a deterrent.

"I did liposuction on a slender, 14-year-old athletic soccer player with big, unattractive saddlebags on her outer thighs — just like her mother and grandmother. No matter what she did, she was going to inherit that body form. We checked with her pediatrician and she did great." **DT**