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COVER STORY

Fat or fiction

Lipodissolve injections are popular—but are they safe?

By [Tracy Swartz](#)
RedEye

Published July 12 2007

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Everyone has an inch of flab to pinch or grab. But what if you could melt that extra belly jelly with a series of needle pricks during your lunch break?

Here's the skinny on "lipodissolve," which involves multiple injections with a liquid cocktail intended to sculpt an area of soft fat.

Promoted as a cheaper and quicker alternative to liposuction, lipodissolve has exploded in popularity in Chicago, according to five area physicians. More medical spas and clinics are offering the procedure, and even doctors who don't offer it say they receive constant inquiries, from twentysomethings to seniors.

But don't lift your shirt just yet. Some area doctors refuse to perform the treatment, citing safety concerns and a lack of evidence showing the technique truly busts fat. The lipodissolve solution has not garnered approval from the Food and Drug Administration, which warns consumers that the agency cannot assure its safety.

Still, Dr. Toni Bark of Evanston estimated she has performed lipodissolve on 120 patients in a little more than a year. Patients typically sign up to contour their lower bellies, saddlebags, butts, thighs, jowls or love handles, she said.

The treatment has been nicknamed "lunchtime lipo" because most patients can undergo a session in 30 minutes. Two to three sessions are generally needed for desired results. But the injections are not intended for the obese, Bark said. Doctors recommend lipodissolve for patients interested in losing an inch or two.

When the lipodissolve solution is injected into an area of fat, the fluid breaks down fat cells like the body does naturally in the digestion process, says the American Society of Aesthetic Lipodissolve. The dead fat cells are then removed by the body's repair mechanisms, the society says.

A typical lipodissolve mixture contains phosphatidylcholine (soy-derived) and sodium deoxycholate (bile salt).

An injection of the compound is designed to cause the localized fat deposit to emulsify, dissolve and flush out of the body almost immediately, Bark said.

But Dr. Julius Few of Northwestern University told RedEye his doubts about the procedure and the cocktail.

"You're talking about a substance that we don't know that much about," said Few, an associate professor of plastic surgery. "These products, many of them come in from overseas, where the whole issue of cleanliness, sterility, etc., may not be the primary focus. That's why this whole FDA issue is so important."

That apparently is not the sentiment of lipodissolve patients treated by Bark. A few told RedEye the injections dissolved their fat with little or no pain.

The patients contacted by RedEye refused to go on the record about the procedure because they didn't want people to know they had it done. They told their stories under the condition their names not be used.

One patient of Bark's, a 38-year-old, said the procedure firm her stomach, saddlebags and her cheeks. The Evanston woman, unfazed by the FDA's warning, said she chose to undergo the procedure because she prefers a needle over a knife.



"Why on Earth would you ever want to get liposuction or a tummy tuck?" she asked. "The results were every bit as good, and the trauma to my body was nil."

The side effects vary from patient to patient, according to a 2004 report by the American Society of Aesthetic Lipodissolve. The report cited study results that found some patients experienced pain in the treated area, bruises, itching, burning and redness, while other patients noticed dents, nodules (little knobs) or swelling, which Bark called a good side effect.

"The more swelling you have, the more fat cells you've killed and the more fat debris to kill off," said Bark, a licensed physician who specializes in homeopathy and nutritional medicine. "It's a very nice procedure. People love it."

Don't expect Dr. Lawrence Iteld to wield that needle any time soon.

The Chicago plastic surgeon said there's not enough information available indicating that lipodissolve treatments are safe.

"There are a few studies out of Europe that say it works," said Iteld, a plastic surgeon for three years. "While it may work, we just don't have a lot of good data about safety and long-term efficacy."

The ingredients and mixtures used in lipodissolve treatments vary from physician to physician. The solution often is prepared by a compounding pharmacy—a facility that mixes ingredients to make customized medications—which doesn't face the strict federal enforcement rules that govern cosmetics and medical devices such as those used in liposuction.

The FDA would not disclose whether the lipodissolve solution has ever been considered for approval, but the procedure garnered the agency's attention in 2003, when the FDA sent a warning letter to a New York business allegedly distributing a lipodissolve solution. The agency asked the business to stop marketing the mixture, saying "there is no substantial evidence that the product is generally recognized as safe and effective for its intended use."

Dr. Few of Northwestern also worries about the procedure's training requirements.

There's no one main certification program. Physicians typically are taught lipodissolve by other physicians in a class that spans one or two workdays, according to interviews with area doctors.

Dr. Brooke Jackson, a Chicago dermatologist, said she has performed lipodissolve on about 30 people, mostly women in their 30s or 40s. Jackson said her patients experience temporary redness and soreness after the injections—comparable with a strenuous exercise. But the outcome is worthwhile, she said. "With lipodissolve in this country, the results have been very, very impressive," Jackson said.

The lack of an FDA endorsement didn't seem to bother the sunbathers at the 63rd Street Beach, where waist management tops summer concerns.

After RedEye explained the procedure, beachgoer Felicia Walker said she would undergo lipodissolve to firm her stomach and thighs. She said she has mulled plastic surgery, but believes surgery poses more of a risk than lipodissolve, despite the apparent risks associated with the injections.

"Surgery—you get the studies and research, and it can still go bad," said Walker, 26, who traveled from South Bend, Ind., to the South Side beach.

On the other end of the beach, Bennetta Yatsa disagreed.

Yatsa of Hyde Park said she never has considered plastic surgery and wouldn't advocate for lipodissolve.

"[FDA officials] haven't shown any side effects yet," said Yatsa, 40. "It's not guaranteed. You're doing it at your own risk."



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