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Lipo-dissolve procedure lacks long-term data

By Dr. Anthony Jennings

One of the more recent medical procedures to receive public attention is lipo-dissolve. Advertisements claim that this simple procedure will "melt" fat. It is being promoted as an alternative to liposuction, a procedure that involves removing fat by vacuuming it away through a thin metal tube inserted into the skin.

Lipo-dissolve involves injecting fatty deposits with a combination of substances. The exact formula for the lipo-dissolve solution varies as different physicians may use different combinations of multivitamins, alpha lipid acid, enzymes and plant extracts.

Ingredients also may include chemical agents, such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications, antibiotics and hormones. The two most common substances used in lipo-dissolve are phosphatidylcholine (PPC) and sodium deoxycholate.

"It can sound so enticing to hear a promise of removing fat with no effort," said Kristin Philbrick, MD, a physician with SSM St. Charles Clinic Medical Group and on staff with me at SSM St. Joseph Hospital West. "Who wouldn't want to lose weight instantly without changing your lifestyle?"

But Philbrick notes that habits that create fat in the first place—eating junk food, eating too much and being inactive—will continue to create fat unless they are changed. In other words, even if you remove some fat from the body, real lifestyle changes are needed in order to become and remain fit and healthy.

"And don't forget that there's a lot more to health than just appearances. I think people should be as concerned with the state of their internal organs, like their heart and lungs, as with what size clothes they wear," she said.

Lipo-dissolve's long-term effects have not been documented scientifically, and the procedure is not approved by the Food and Drug Administration. Liposuction, on the other hand, is FDA-approved and has been proven an effective method for permanently removing fat cells. However, as with any medical procedure, there are risks. And because it lacks empirical data, lipo-dissolve may be found to have long-term health consequences that are as yet unknown.

"People who undergo lipo-dissolve are told that they must follow healthy diet and exercise guidelines in order to maintain the positive effects of the procedure," Philbrick said. "If they make these changes, they will likely lose weight naturally. It's really a matter of how much risk the patient is willing to take in undergoing a procedure that has no long-term scientific data behind it."

Lipo-dissolve is not recommended as a means of weight loss. Instead, it is suggested as a non-surgical method of removing small pockets of fat in areas such as arms, chin, belly and legs, that remain despite diet and exercise.

After receiving the injections, patients usually experience swelling and redness for a few days as the fat

liquefies and the body's immune system is activated. Most people require two or three treatments to achieve the desired effect.

If you are considering lipo-dissolve or any other type of medical procedure for purely cosmetic purposes, always do your homework. Learn everything you can about the procedure and seek out an experienced, board-certified physician to perform it. You only have one body, so be an educated consumer.

Dr. Anthony Jennings is director of the Department of Emergency Medicine at SSM St. Joseph Hospital West in Lake Saint Louis. He is board-certified in emergency medicine and has achieved fellowship status in the American College of Emergency Physicians and the American College of Osteopathic Emergency Physicians.