

Zapping away the fat

People looking to fight their flab without the surgical fuss are turning to pain-free laser treatments. But some surgeons say the procedures fail to deliver top-notch results



BY CARLY WEEKS OTTAWA

No matter what she tried, Karen Kruper always had a muffin top – the flabby skin around her waist that would stick out when she did up her jeans.

Ms. Kruper, an actress who lives in Vancouver, didn't want to undergo the painful and costly process of liposuction.

So when she heard about a new procedure that uses lasers to reduce fat without surgery, she couldn't resist. After three 10-minute sessions during clinical trials for the Lapex 2000 LipoLaser, which was recently approved for use in the country by Health Canada, Ms. Kruper said she lost about an inch from her waist.

"It was pretty remarkable,"

she said. "There's no painkillers required, there's absolutely no downtime."

Ms. Kruper is one of many Canadians opting for new procedures that use lasers to target fat in order to avoid traditional liposuction, which can require a significant investment and extensive recovery period.

But some plastic surgeons question whether laser treatments produce worthwhile results, especially considering some, including the LipoLaser procedure, don't even remove fat from the body.

"I'm skeptical that it would work as well as they say it does because liposuction isn't just removing the fat, it's sculpting" – a process where doctors mould skin from the inside to appear firm and toned as they

vacuum out the fat – said Lorne Tarshis, chief surgeon at the Institute of Cosmetic Surgery in Toronto.

Meridian Medical Inc., which makes the LipoLaser, touts the treatment as a non-invasive and pain-free way to reduce body fat. However, the company also says the procedure is meant for "spot fat reduction" and that clients shouldn't expect dramatic results. Patients can expect to lose one to four centimetres after a treatment, which costs \$150 to \$200.

"You can have fairly significant loss when incorporated with diet and lifestyle," said Jonas LaForge, a naturopathic physician and Meridian Medical's director of medical and technical sales.

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Jonas LaForge, a naturopathic physician, gives Karen Kruper a LipoLaser treatment. "There's no painkillers required, there's absolutely no downtime," Ms. Kruper says.

JOHN LEHMANN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Patients opt for laser treatments to avoid surgery

» The LipoLaser procedure works by placing paddles on the patient's desired problem area so lasers can target and break up fat cells into fatty acids, water and glycerol that are either used by the body or flushed out.

It's the second laser-based liposuction procedure to be approved in Canada in the past six months as the cosmetic surgery industry seeks to cater to clients such as Ms. Kruper who don't want to experience the trauma of surgery to trim down.

"I didn't want to go through liposuction," Ms. Kruper said. "To me there's no comparison between surgery and lasering."

In the United States, the LipoLaser is awaiting approval by the Food and Drug Administration. Unlike the LipoLaser, the Smartlipo treatment, approved for use in Canada earlier this year, uses lasers to liquefy fat cells that are later vacuumed out of the body with a cannula.

The American Society of Plastic Surgeons said that 9.1 million minimally invasive plastic surgeries on all areas of the body were conducted in 2006, an increase of 66 per cent from 2000.

Controversy over liposuction

erupted in September when a Toronto woman died after undergoing a procedure. The case highlighted concerns in Canada over family doctors who perform cosmetic surgery without the proper qualifications.

Claudio De Lorenzi, former president of the Canadian Society for Aesthetic (Cosmetic) Plastic Surgery, said he does not use laser fat-reduction treatments at his Kitchener, Ont., clinic because they don't seem to offer any advantages over traditional treatments.

"Apart from some slight reduction in bruising, there's really no major benefit from it," he said. To some in the industry, this new crop of laser treatments seems to be a response to the growing demand for pain-free procedures that may simply be ineffective.

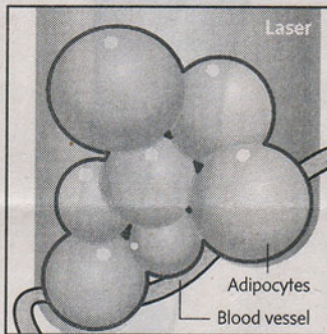
"There's a whole trend around trying to get surgical results without surgery," Dr. Tarhis said. "I think it's possible with liposuction, but I don't think we're there yet."

Ms. Kruper said the treatments worked for her and helped eliminate pockets of fat she's been unable to get rid of for years.

"I'm all over it," she said. "I just have to cite my own case."

Bye-bye muffin top?

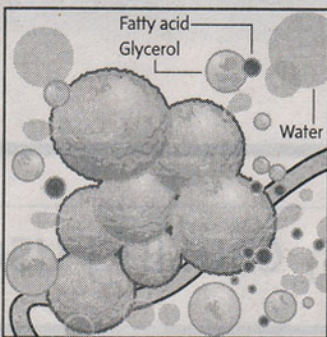
Laser energy from LipoLaser irradiates adipocytes (fat cells).



Pores form on the adipocytes allowing contents to spill out.



Water, free fatty acids and glycerol spill out.



Adipocytes reduce in size while blood vessel stays unaffected.

