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Cosmetic surgeons aim lasers to melt away fat

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By Maria Puente, USA TODAY

Doctors for years have used lasers to zap unwanted hair, make broken capillaries disappear, resurface skin, remove brown spots. Now lasers are being used to melt fat.

Laser-assisted lipolysis, or laser liposuction, could be the next big thing in fat-busting procedures. Liposuction is already the No. 1 surgical cosmetic procedure in the USA: More than 400,000 were performed in 2006, the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery says.

"I see lipo going through the roof, becoming even more popular," says Robert Gotkin, a Long Island cosmetic surgeon who has used a recently approved laser called Smartlipo to liquefy the fat cells of more than 50 patients, male and female, since December.

Neil Sadick, a Manhattan cosmetic surgeon who has performed nearly two dozen laser liposuctions over the past six months, says it's inevitable that laser lipo will spread, given that more patients are seeking less-invasive procedures. "It's the next generation of liposuction with better results and less trauma to the body," Sadick says.

Conventional liposuction — in which the patient is opened up and solid chunks of fat are sucked out — can be costly and painful. Other methods of removing fat, such as ultrasound waves, also can leave the patient bruised and in recovery for weeks.

The appeal of laser liposuction is that it's minimally invasive and performed under local anesthesia or oral sedation, with virtually no pain or bruising; normal activities can be resumed within 48 hours. The surgeon makes a tiny incision, inserts a laser fiber probe — smaller than a strand of uncooked angel-hair pasta — just under the surface of the skin and aims it at fat.

"You're using the laser to rupture fat cells, like bursting bubbles," Gotkin says. For small areas, the liquefied fat cells are reabsorbed by the body; for larger areas, the fat is aspirated.

"I always wanted (liposuction), but I was afraid of scarring and pain and recovery time," says Renata Morawiec-loj, 39, of East Stroudsburg, Pa., who went to Gotkin recently to treat her abdominal area. "When I woke up, I asked the doctor if he's done, and I couldn't believe it — I got up and started dancing."

Another advantage over conventional lipo: body "sculpting."

"There's immediate tightening, because the body's response to the (laser) heating induces new collagen formation," says Sadick, president of the Cosmetic Surgery Foundation.

The cost of laser lipo is comparable to conventional liposuction — about \$4,000 to \$8,000. So far, no patient has reported negative aftereffects.

"I felt no pain, had no bruising — none — no downtime," says Jorgilina Abreu, 46, a New Jersey resident who went to Sadick for laser lipo on her abdomen. "I didn't take painkillers, and the little cut is so small that no one would even know it was there."

Smartlipo, made by laser manufacturer Cynosure, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in November; approval of a second laser by a different company is pending. Similar lasers have been in use in Europe for years, says Cynosure spokeswoman

Gretchen Bender.

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