Fat Freezing: Too Good to Be True?

By Joelle Klein

“What would you like to have done?” Brooke French, MD, wrote to me after I emailed her an interview request about the one-year anniversary of the Division’s cosmetics-focused Plastic Surgery Clinic. I suggested to French, who directs the Cosmetics Program in the Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, that in addition to talking about the clinic’s year in business (see sidebar), I could, maybe, get a procedure and write about it.

Stay cool. I came to the clinic, located in the Anschutz Health and Wellness Center, in late March, armed with my computer and tape recorder and ready to see if I was a good candidate for CoolSculpting. I wasn’t prepared to get my fat zapped that afternoon, which French suggested. Wouldn’t I need to prepare in some way? Wouldn’t there be downtime that would interfere with my busy schedule?

CoolSculpting requires no preparation and there is no downtime after the hour-long procedure, French informed me. I could actually go to the gym later that night if I wanted to.

French explained that CoolSculpting is an FDA-approved procedure that essentially kills fat cells permanently by freezing them. She said that 5 million people have already undergone the procedure, and then showed me some marketing materials from Zeltiq, the manufacturer of the machine, that display some pudgy “before” photos and less pudgy “after” photos.

A good candidate, she said, is basically someone with enough pinchable fat to load into the suction apparatus. People with ulcers, abdominal hernias, poor skin elasticity, severe Raynaud’s disease and other cold-intolerant conditions were the only poor candidates.

Then there was CoolSculpting. Described as a minimally invasive body contouring treatment, it seemed, like other similar non-surgical fat reduction treatments, too good to be true. But French assured me that it was actually quite successful for removing diet- and exercise-resistant fat, as she gently put it. In other words, it wasn’t for people who were simply resistant to diets and exercise.

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Warm-up treatment. I’m still not convinced of the procedure’s effectiveness because I believe people will do anything to avoid cutting back on fattening foods and going to the gym. But French’s confidence in the procedure is persuasive.

Each CoolSculpting procedure can reduce the treated area by 20 percent to 25 percent and runs $750 to $1,500 per treatment, with usually around two to ten procedures recommended, depending on what the patient wants to have done, French said. She is quick to caution that the machine will not flatten my stomach, or anyone’s, like a tummy tuck, which has a much more dramatic result, but for a more dramatic price. A tummy tuck, which can include liposuction and a recovery period of about two to six weeks, runs from $5,000 to $10,000.

Joelle Klein relaxes at the Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Clinic while a machine freezes her fat cells. Will she see results in three months?

But where to start? The bags and lines under my eyes really bother me, as does my post-pregnancies belly flab, and the brown sun spots on my cheek. I’ll stop there.

Botox, fillers, chemical peels, CoolSculpting … there was a plethora of services the clinic offered to ease my physical insecurities, but a decision wasn’t easy. Botox is not interesting to write about. Been there, done that, anyway. Fillers like Juvederm or Restalyn weren’t the answers to my personal aging-related anxieties.

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French admitted that a small number of patients have been disappointed with CoolSculpting because the results weren’t what they expected, but that the vast majority have been pleased.

“It’s the non-invasive procedure that I’ve found to be the most effective, least painful and it’s reasonably priced,” she said.

Unfortunately, I easily passed the pinchable fat test, so I was ready to try it. French advised four sessions for me – one for my lower belly, one for my upper belly (near my rib cage), and then two diagonal treatments on my lower belly, to attack the fat from a different angle.

Then the worst part of the procedure happened. I had to expose my flab for a “before” photo (to be printed in a follow-up article, so stay tuned). After the embarrassing photo was taken (this one won’t be posted on my Facebook page), I reclined in a dentist-like chair while French determined which size suction apparatus to use to suck and freeze my fat.

She placed a slimy cloth on the area to be treated, explaining that it was to protect me from frostbite, and then fired up the Hoover-like CoolSculpting machine. My fat filled up the suction piece quickly. It felt like a giant, powerful dust buster clamped on to my stomach. It didn’t hurt; it just felt awkward. I sat there for an hour, checking email and calling a few friends to tell them what I was doing at that second. Of course, they all wanted to try it – if it worked.

Cold comfort. After the hour, French turned off the machine and gently removed the apparatus from my belly, which was now, unfortunately, in the shape of the suction piece. French called it “the popsicle.” She massaged it for a few minutes until it returned to a normal shape. She handed me a towel to wipe the slime from the cloth, and I was on my way.

Side effects, I was warned, can include redness for several hours after the treatment, numbness, itching, tingling, pain in the treated area, cramping, nausea, bloating, muscle spasms or soreness. Some serious side effects can occur, says French, such as late onset pain or numbness that requires medical intervention, but it’s very rare. I felt only minor numbness and tenderness for a couple of weeks.

The results? I may notice something in three weeks, but the full results won’t be apparent for three months, French said. As I write this, it’s two-weeks post-procedure and the numbness and soreness are almost entirely gone. So far, the painless, no downtime and minimal discomfort claims panned out. I did work out the day after the treatment without incident. My belly fat at this time is still very much intact but I’m hopeful, and already fantasizing about getting my love handles zapped if there is a noticeable difference in three months. Could bikini shopping be in my not-so-distance future?
Reconstructing the Clinic’s First Year

The CU Plastic Surgery Clinic in the Anschutz Health and Wellness Center (AHWC) completed its first year in business last month. Brooke French, MD, said the clinic has approached, but not exceeded, the financial goals it set last year. The clinic is often full and plans to add an additional medical provider and a physician’s assistant to the team, which now consists of five board-certified plastic surgeons and one physician assistant. It also plans to open an additional half-day.

A new half-day Chief Resident Clinic debuted about six months ago, French said. Residents perform cosmetic consultations and procedures — anything from breast lifts and tummy tucks to Botox and Restalyn injections — under the watchful eye of faculty physicians.

“That was the original intentional of our clinic … to build an academic training ground for future plastic and reconstructive residents,” explained French.

The Chief Resident Clinic is also a win for patients. Cosmetic surgical procedures are performed at rates steeply discounted from attending surgeons’ fees. Non-invasive procedures are also done at discounted rates. Not surprisingly, the clinic is usually full, French said.

UCH employees can get blepharoplasties (eye jobs) done by an attending physician for a discount, French added.

Meanwhile, the Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery continues its partnership with ABC’s “Extreme Weight Loss” reality show and the AHWC, providing surgical procedures for any patient who qualifies after dramatic weight loss. French is also hoping to partner with the Breast Center this fall to promote awareness about breast reconstruction and to give back to the community by offering discounts for surgery, Botox injections, or chemical peels to breast cancer survivors.