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# Body

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## Cellulite: The Hype, the Hope, the Bottom Line

There's no shame in cellulite. Ninety percent of women have it, and it isn't caused by eating too much or exercising too little. So does that mean there's nothing you can do about it? Not quite. **CHRISTINE FELLINGHAM** cuts through the nonsense and sizes up the latest treatments.

HOW'S THIS FOR EVIDENCE THAT OUR BEAUTY standards are completely arbitrary? Dimples adorning a smile are utterly adorable. Dimples sprinkled about the hips and thighs? Not adorable.

But cellulite is normal, says David Bank, MD, director of the Center for Dermatology, Cosmetic & Laser Surgery in Mount Kisco, New York. There's no medical reason to treat it, and there are no health benefits to be gained by reducing it, unless you're doing that with exercise, says Robin Ashinoff, MD, chief of

cosmetic dermatology at Hackensack University Medical Center in New Jersey. Cellulite isn't caused by being overweight. And sitting all day does not exacerbate it.

If you're tempted to try to do something to smooth over or eliminate the dimples, here's a guide to help you navigate the maze of products and treatments promising to do that. But keep in mind that while some might help reduce the appearance of cellulite *temporarily*, nothing has been proven to eliminate it. So before launching into any of these treatments, from creams ▶

to expensive and potentially dangerous injectables, you may want to ask: Might your money be better spent taking a vacation that could put those dimples in perspective?

### Creams, Gels, and Lotions

**What they are:** Most contain over-the-counter ingredients like caffeine (shown to shrink fat cells in test tubes), alpha hydroxy acids or retinol (both of which speed cell turnover), or vitamin C (shown to increase collagen production).

**The promise:** These products typically claim that four to eight weeks of daily use will diminish the appearance of dimples by firming, thickening, and tightening the skin. Some claim that caffeine or other ingredients will burn fat.

**The bottom line:** Though caffeine may be effective in a test tube, that doesn't mean it will work in a topically applied cream, says Bank. "Some of the creams do produce results, but no one has ever done a large, controlled, double-blind study on any of them—nor have there been any comparative studies finding that one works better than the other," says Mitchel Goldman, MD, associate clinical professor of dermatology at the University of California San Diego Medical Center. Some doctors agree that creams containing retinol, alpha hydroxy acids, and moisturizing ingredients might help reduce (not eliminate) the appearance of cellulite by improving the smoothness and/or hydration of the skin. Results are cosmetic only, says Bank, who serves as an expert witness on cellulite products and treatments for the Federal Trade Commission. "Topical creams cannot penetrate to the layer of fat," he says. **Cost:** \$18 to \$135.

### Spa Treatments

**What they are:** Lymphatic drainage massage is a vigorous (not unpleasant) deep tissue massage that involves squeezing and kneading cellulite. Endermologie is an uncomfortable 35- to 50-minute treatment that requires being encased in a body stocking while a technician runs a handheld roller and suction device over your cellulite. The vacuum squeezes your skin between the rollers.

**The promise:** Both methods claim that the kneading helps to break apart clumps of fat cells and release lymphatic waste, and, with

Endermologie, that the suction stretches the tissue that creates the dimples.

**The bottom line:** Any improvements from lymphatic drainage massage will be seen instantaneously—and briefly; they don't usually last longer than a couple of days, says Bank. Endermologie can also reduce the appearance of cellulite temporarily, says Lisa Donofrio, MD, associate clinical professor of dermatology at Yale University School of Medicine. But it usually requires an initial series of 14 or more treatments and continued monthly maintenance. Stop the treatments and the dimples will reappear, says Bank.

**Cost:** Both treatments start at around \$100 per session. Lymphatic massages are typically booked in a series of six.

### High-Tech Toys

**What they are:** Light-source treatments like TriActive (a suction-massage device with six diode lasers recently cleared by the FDA) and VelaSmooth (a handheld device combining radio frequency with infrared light and suction, currently being reviewed by the FDA). Electrode treatments like Ionithermie involve slathering the body in a clay mask and delivering light electrical currents to areas with cellulite.

**The promise:** TriActive promotes the shrinkage of fat cells and loosens deep fibrous tissue to minimize the appearance of cellulite, says Goldman. "VelaSmooth softens and rearranges the fat cells so they don't bulge in a dimpled pattern," says Neil Sadick, MD, clinical associate professor of dermatology at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University. These light source therapies typically require a minimum of eight to 15 treatments, followed by monthly maintenance. The clay and electrodes in Ionithermie help evaporate excess water in the skin.

**The bottom line:** The radio frequency and laser therapies are promising but still unproven. "At this point, we can't predict who will have a good result and who won't," says Donofrio. With the lasers, there is a slight risk of darkened pigmentation, mild burns, and redness that can last weeks or—in very rare cases—months. "I've seen treatments like Ionithermie shrink thighs by an inch in circumference," says Goldman. "But they don't work the same on everyone, and results don't last longer than a day or two."

**Cost:** TriActive, eight to 15 sessions at \$85 each. VelaSmooth requires eight sessions and, if FDA approved, will cost about \$100 to \$150 per treatment. Ionithermie, five to ten sessions at about \$125 each.

### Injectables

**What they are:** Mesotherapy involves anywhere from a dozen to hundreds of injections of various drugs, plant extracts, and vitamins directly into cellulite during eight or more 15-minute appointments. Lipodissolve injections use a single ingredient, phosphatidylcholine, shown in test tubes to break down the size of fat cells. Autologous fat transplants use fat harvested from the patient's own body to fill dimples.

**The promise:** Mesotherapy injections are supposed to dissolve fat deposits and improve circulation and lymphatic drainage, but according to most experts, there's no evidence that they work, and they may be dangerous. Many of the ingredients are not clinically tested for injectable use, and there is no standardization of the formulas. "People are injecting all kinds of ingredients in any number of combinations," says Rhoda S. Narins, MD, clinical professor of dermatology at the New York University School of Medicine and director of the Dermatology Surgery and Laser Center in New York. "Just because you can ingest something doesn't mean you can inject it." Some of the herbs aren't pharmaceutical grade; they're junk, says Donofrio. The ingredient in Lipodissolve has been shown to burst fat cells, which could leave large amounts of debris (lipids) in your bloodstream, possibly attaching to and clogging blood vessels. Having a doctor harvest your fat to inject into cellulite dimples is less risky. "Autologous fat is commonly used to fill acne scars and liposuction mistakes; it is being investigated to see if it can effectively fill in large cellulite dimples," says Bank.

**The bottom line:** Neither Mesotherapy nor Lipodissolve injections are FDA approved. "I would tell my patients to stay away," says Donofrio. Fat injections administered by an experienced doctor are considered safe, but their effect is temporary, says Bank.

**Cost:** Mesotherapy, \$3,000 to \$5,000 for ten sessions; Lipodissolve, about \$1,000 per session; and autologous fat injections, about \$3,500 per treatment. ●