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Can you change your body in one afternoon?

New diet- and surgery-free methods promise to eradicate your belly and help you drop a size. To find out if they truly work, we went straight to women who've tried them.

BY LINDSY VAN GELDER

Raise your hand if you can relate to this: You have a muffin top, a tummy pooch, or stretch marks (yeah, our hands are up high too). Whether your trouble spot came from having kids or plain old genetics, you know how stubborn it is to lose.

Over the past several years, more and more women have turned to serious surgery to fix those issues. Tummy tucks remain among the top five most popular plastic surgeries and have increased 15 percent since 2009, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Results are usually great... *if* you're willing to put up with general anesthesia, months of recovery, scars, and a bill that can top \$8,000 (and is rarely covered by insurance). If you don't fall into that category, here's some good news: New body-shaping treatments performed by a dermatologist, such as lasers and radiofrequency, can melt fat, tighten saggy skin, and fade stretch marks. And while these technologies aren't cheap, "they come without the health risks or lengthy downtime of plastic surgery," says Angela Lamb, M.D., director of the Westside Mount Sinai Dermatology Faculty Practice at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. We talked to scores of real women from across the country who've had these treatments done (whom we reached via RealSelf.com, a cosmetic-procedure resource site where patients share experiences), then asked top dermatologists to weigh in too. Here's the skinny on two that can make a difference.

Tones flabby spots: **CoolSculpting**

WHAT IT IS: A machine that freezes fat using a cold-pack suction-cup applicator attached to your stomach, hips, saddlebags, or upper back fat. (Arms aren't treatable, because the nerves there are too close to the skin's surface and could get damaged.) "Fat freezes at a different temperature than muscles, skin, or blood vessels, so it doesn't impact those vital structures," says Sue Ellen Cox, M.D., medical director of Aesthetics Solutions Dermatology in Chapel Hill, NC, and an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. "The fat cells then die and are gradually flushed out via your lymphatic system, so patients may not see results for at least a month." A session lasts one to two hours per body part, and different applicators are used to treat different parts, so some take longer than others. Most women only need CoolSculpting one time, and if your M.D. has more than one machine, you can get several areas done at once.

"CoolSculpting works best on women who are within 15 to 20 pounds of their ideal weight," says Lamb. If you weigh more, you'll still probably take off a couple of inches, and you can opt for more sessions a few months down the road.

COST: Around \$700 to \$1,000 per body part or trouble spot, so it depends on how much you want done (prices tend to be higher in the big cities). Some doctors offer package deals when treating multiple areas.

WHAT TO EXPECT: “The device feels *cold*, like placing ice on your stomach, and the suction is intense,” says Airene Williamson, 31, of Las Vegas. Still, she was comfortable enough to watch Netflix for most of the three-hour procedure, while Jill Swanson, 49, of Merrimac, MA, read on her iPad. Both women report that although the initial sucking sensation was unnerving, they got used to it within a few minutes.

THE RESULTS: Most patients lose at least 20 percent of the treated fat. “They’ll tell you that you can drive yourself home afterward, but my husband had to pick me up,” says Williamson, whose stomach was bruised enough that strapping on the car seat belt was uncomfortable. Though she noticed changes in her body within the first 24 hours and resumed her normal activities quickly, she wore Spanx for the next three weeks and regularly applied ice to the area—“both of which can help ease swelling and discomfort,” says Cox (who did not treat Williamson). After three weeks, Williamson had lost 2.5 inches around her middle. “I’d definitely do it again,” she declares, ten months post-treatment.

Swanson’s experience was a bit rockier, though not uncommon, doctors say. Initially her stomach was so swollen that she couldn’t sleep, and she had nausea, tingling, and burning. “I was out of work for three days, and it was two weeks before I felt okay enough to get back on the treadmill,” she says. Cox (who did not treat Swanson) notes, “The burning and tingling are normal and may last several weeks, but nausea isn’t typical, so if that occurs, let your doctor know.” Swanson adds that although she didn’t start seeing results until seven weeks later, she’s now a believer at one year out. “As a mother of two 10-pound C-section babies who are now in their 20s, I’m happy with my stomach for the first time in forever,” she says. “I just feel better about myself.”

Tightens slack skin: Radiofrequency

WHAT IT IS: RF, as doctors call it, refers to devices that use radio waves to heat tissue deep down in the skin, which triggers collagen production. “As new collagen grows, it plumps up skin so it’s smoother while also increasing elastin, the fibers that keep skin firm,” says **M. Christine Lee, M.D.**, an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of the **East Bay Laser and Skin Care Center in Walnut Creek, CA.** And these radio waves aren’t the same ones that cell phones emit (which some people have concern over due to their potential link to cancer), “so they’re completely safe,” she says.

RF energy can reduce mild to moderate sagging on abdomens, arms, inner thighs, even knees, and it can also fade stretch marks. “But it can’t get rid of large rolls of skin,” says **Lee**. Also keep in mind: There are numerous machines that offer this technology, and each one works a little differently. The most powerful, and one of the most expensive, is **Thermage**. It requires only one or two treatments that take

up to 90 minutes each; lower-energy devices like **Vanquish**, **Exilis**, Viora, and VelaShape require anywhere from three to 12 shorter sessions spaced several weeks apart, but they’re cheaper in the long run. For stretch marks, **Lee** notes that **Fotona4D**, a procedure that combines several lasers, “works better than anything else, even on years-old stretch marks.” But no matter which machine you go with, radiofrequency is not a permanent fix. “Once you stop the treatments, you stop triggering all that new collagen,” says **Lee**. “So you have to redo them every couple of years to maintain the best results.”

COST: It varies by machine and by the size of the area you’re treating, but **Thermage** is typically \$2,500 to \$4,500 for one full series of treatments, while the lower-powered devices run up to \$2,500 for a complete series. **Fotona4D**, which is brand-new, costs \$6,000 for the full series of four treatments.

WHAT TO EXPECT: All RF devices use heat, so you’ll feel toasty, but because the only side effect is a little redness and bruising, patients agree that these procedures can truly be done

“It took nearly two months before I saw results, but I’m happy with my stomach for the first time in forever.”

—JILL SWANSON, 49

on your lunch hour. Depending on the machine, women describe the sensation as ranging from “like sitting in a hot pan with your skin cooking” (for **Thermage**) to “no different from lying in a tanning bed” (for **Vanquish**). “And speak up if the machine feels too hot,” says Van Barlow*, 42, of Sacramento, CA, who got six **Vanquish** sessions on her belly a year ago. “The doctor can adjust it to a more comfortable level.”

THE RESULTS: It can take months for new collagen to grow, so you have to be patient, but everyone we spoke with who got RF was happy. “I can wear a bikini again!” says Stephanie Weisner, 30, of New York City, who a year ago did three sessions of VelaShape on her legs and one on her tummy. “My legs were firmer after the first treatment, and my post-pregnancy jiggle was gone after 12 weeks. Now, so are my stretch marks.”

While doctors stress that the younger you are, the better your results will be, women in their 40s and even 50s seem just as pleased. “The improvement is substantial,” says Barlow. “By the fourth or fifth treatment, my pants fit better.” Jenna Taylor*, 59, of Portland, OR, had six **Vanquish** treatments on her sagging belly, which was left over from her two C-sections three decades ago. “I’m not flat by any means, but my abs finally have some definition,” she says, adding that she dropped from a size 10 to an 8 by the fourth session. **Lee** (who did not treat Taylor) explains that “even though RF doesn’t melt fat, by tightening that loose skin, it can shrink the circumference of the area.” As for Taylor, at just under two years post-treatment, she’s now down to a size 6: “Seeing such a dramatic change in my stomach motivated me to get healthier all around.”