

Considering Liposuction? Know the Ins and Outs



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By Michael Schroeder

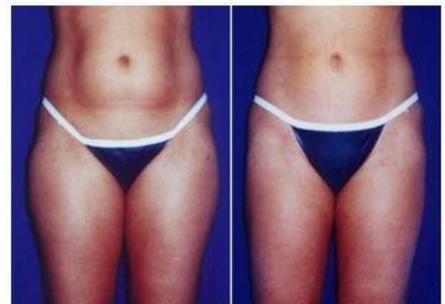
@MikeSchroederIN

Michael Schroeder, former senior writer, covered health care and other consumer topics for Angie's List.

Despite advances, liposuction results remain mixed. Experts say patients must do their homework, from finding a qualified doctor to making lifestyle changes.

Theresa Palm, a 52-year-old member in Holly Springs, N.C., says despite a healthy lifestyle that included watching her diet and swimming three times a week, she couldn't get rid of the fat in her abdomen, sides and back.

"There are certain areas as we age that are more resistant to tone improvement," Palm says. So about two years ago and again in November, she went to highly rated Dr. Cynthia Diehl at Diehl Plastic Surgery, based in Raleigh, for liposuction. "The improvement is just amazing," says Palm, who spent \$7,300 total out of pocket for two sessions of the cosmetic procedure, which insurance doesn't cover. "You



Patients elect to undergo liposuction to remove fat from areas such as the abdomen and thighs, such as in this before photo on the left, but results vary. (Photos courtesy of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons)

just feel better in clothing.”

What is liposuction?

Liposuction involves suctioning fat through specialized tubes inserted in a patient’s body while under local or general anesthesia, to remove excess fat from targeted areas like the thighs, midsection and under the chin. Advances in the procedure, such as numbing agents that allow providers to safely suction out more fat, have improved outcomes and safety for patients.

But while most Angie’s List members who submitted reviews on liposuction say they had a positive experience, some say the procedure proved quite painful and the results lackluster or worse. So experts recommend that anyone considering the procedure do their homework, from finding the right doctor to making lasting lifestyle changes — including maintaining a healthy diet — before deciding to undergo this elective procedure.

“It’s not a weight loss procedure, it’s a body shaping procedure,” stresses Dr. Geo Tabbal, chief resident at highly rated University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. Tabbal co-authored a paper on ways to improve results and safety for patients undergoing liposuction, which the medical journal of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons published online in November. Those range from talking with a surgeon to determine if you’re a good candidate and discussing medications you take before proceeding with lipo to wearing compression garments as directed post-procedure to reduce swelling. Inform your surgeon of any potential medical issues, as certain conditions, such as severe heart problems and higher risk for blood clots, might make the procedure unsafe.

As you would with any procedure, keep your primary care doctor informed of your plans, progress and side effects, along with your surgeon, to provide the most complete picture for ongoing care.

Who’s the typical patient?

Dr. Ramsey Choucair, a highly rated plastic surgeon in Dallas, says his average patient tends to be slightly overweight, but not obese. “They take care of themselves, they just can’t get rid of their love handles,” Choucair says.

Patients usually return to work within days and see the most dramatic reduction in swelling and results within about a month, Diehl says, but she adds it routinely takes six months or more to see full results. Recovery time varies based on factors ranging from the amount of fat removed to whether lipo was performed under general or local anesthesia.

“There’s nothing simple about surgery,” says Dr. Scot Glasber, president-elect of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, which advocates seeing a plastic surgeon certified through the American Board of Medical Specialties. Receiving certification from the ABMS requires a minimum five years of surgical training, and a plastic surgery residency. “We’ve had years of [training], not a weekend,” Diehl says.

Glasber says going to a “cosmetic surgeon,” or a doctor who has surgery experience and performs certain cosmetic procedures, but isn’t ABMS-certified in plastic surgery, doesn’t cut it.

The society also recommends undergoing the procedure in an accredited facility to ensure safety protocols are in place. Costs range widely by provider and procedure, but lipo averages just under \$3,000 per procedure, according to CareCredit, which offers healthcare financing for consumers.

What are the complications?

Common side effects of lipo include temporary swelling, bruising and soreness. In rare cases, surgery complications may include blood clots or infection and even result in death. And some cosmetic mishaps can leave a lasting legacy.

“I’ll never be right,” says Samantha Anders, 40, of Empire, Ala., who went to Dr. Shelby Eich at Eich Plastic Surgery in Birmingham, Ala., for skin removal surgery, thigh lift procedure and lipo. Anders says she had reached a weight of more than 300 pounds, and lost 100 pounds before seeing Eich several years ago to improve her general health and reduce stress on joints. “I was on a mission to be the person I wanted to be, in better shape, better able to enjoy my life and keep up with my kids,” she says. “That was what I was shooting for — not perfection, not Pamela Anderson, just a body type that I would be able to live with and maintain from there on out.”

But instead of a slimmer midsection, she says she was left with deep, painful scarring from her skin removal and thigh lift procedures that she says can still make it difficult to stand. She says surgery also left her with an embarrassing, egg-shaped belly that prevents her from wearing fitting shirts or dresses.

“I went into surgery with his assurance that by doing the liposuction I would come out of surgery with a flatter stomach and a better result,” says Anders, who spent \$3,000 on lipo. “The end result is that I’m disfigured and my self-confidence is gone.” She adds that she doesn’t have the money for revision surgery either.

Eich, who has a poor grade on Angie’s List based on Anders’ review, didn’t return calls to his office seeking comment. Eich Plastic Surgery’s office manager, Susan Branaman, advised that he might not respond because of patient privacy laws.

Doctors with experience performing liposuction say results vary from patient to patient and the most common complaints involve subtler contouring issues than what Anders experienced, or unevenness in the form of bumps, lumps or waviness, in the areas of the body where a provider performed lipo.

Who should perform the liposuction?

No surgeon can promise optimal results for all patients, but Choucair says a successful procedure depends on who performs it. “The surgeon you choose to do your surgery is the single most important factor in getting a result from any cosmetic procedure,” he says. Experts generally advise going to a board-certified plastic surgeon with experience doing liposuction and the clinical knowledge to suggest alternatives to lipo, such as a tummy tuck or no surgery at all.

But regulations vary on the extent to which all doctors, from dermatologists and gynecologists to primary care physicians and in some states dentists, can perform cosmetic procedures, including liposuction.

Dr. Elliece Smith in Lanham, Md., former chair of the department of gynecology at highly rated Doctors Community Hospital in Lanham, where she has privileges, took a seminar to learn how to perform liposuction. The gynecologist, who also describes herself as a cosmetic surgeon, says her decision to perform lipo stems from her desire to serve patients as they age and post-childbirth to look and feel their best. Smith regards plastic surgeons’ warnings against patients getting lipo from doctors who specialize in other areas as territorial. “My feeling is if you’re a surgeon already, it doesn’t take much to learn a new technique,” she says.

Smith attended a multi-day class offered by dermatologic surgeon Dr. Jeffrey Klein, the inventor of tumescent liposuction, which involves using local anesthesia to remove large volumes of fat. She went so far as to have liposuction performed on herself by a fellow trainee to see what it felt like. Since she began offering the procedure, she's performed it on existing gynecology patients and new patients as well.

"I recognize my limitations. I'm not a plastic surgeon," she says. "If patients come in for a consult and they clearly need a tummy tuck, or some other procedure, then I refer them to a plastic surgeon." Where lipo only removes fat, a tummy tuck removes fat, excess skin and typically repairs weakened or separated muscles, such as after multiple childbirths, plastic surgeons say.

Whomever you see for liposuction, ask for before and after photos showing results from previous patients, Diehl says, and expect to see varied outcomes rather than a few polished photos. "I show [patients] the good, the bad and the ugly because that's the reality of surgery," she says. Experts say you should also be able to speak in advance with the doctor who will perform the procedure to get your questions answered and determine if you're a candidate for liposuction.

What now?

Be prepared to work hard to maintain results, too, as research shows fat removed during lipo can — and will — return in other places, especially if patients don't maintain a healthy weight.

"Surgery is only part of this. The key to that satisfaction is good lifestyle changes that are everlasting," Tabbal says. "This is not the best procedure for people who feel like diet and exercise never worked for them."