

Two years ago, Toms River resident Cindy Conway, 45, came across a magazine article that she said helped her shed 11 inches from her waist, lower back and thighs. The brief story didn't feature a hot, new diet or exercise program. It focused on an experimental cosmetic procedure called mesotherapy.

Mesotherapy uses a cocktail of injectable drugs, herbs and vitamins to melt fat, reduce cellulite and minimize scars, according to West Orange-based physician Dr. Marion Shapiro, a former emergency medicine specialist who now exclusively devotes her practice to the procedure. Shapiro received her mesotherapy training in France in 2002. While the technique is performed widely in Europe and South America, it is not approved for use here by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

"You inject a solution under the skin to treat different things," Shapiro explained of mesotherapy. "You use different formulations depending on what you're trying to accomplish."

Shapiro said she has almost 30 formulations that use seven to 10 drugs in each. And while her use of the drugs are typically off-label (a common physician practice of using a drug to treat a condition other than what it was approved to treat), they are all FDA-approved products.

Conway, who went to Shapiro for her mesotherapy, said she underwent 12 sessions with each visit costing roughly \$400. "I think it made a big difference," Conway said. "I went down two to three sizes and there were no side effects except a bit of itching during the procedure and a few black and blue marks following it."

No controlled studies

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Dr. Lyle Back, a Kennedy Health Systems plastic surgeon based in Cherry Hill, said patients should research a cosmetic procedure, as well as their potential surgeons before going under the knife or needle.

"The first thing to realize is there's a lot of information out there that isn't reliable," Back said. "As a patient, you shouldn't rely on one source for your information. Ask around and do your homework outside of the one doctor, the one procedure or the one Web site you initially review."

Back recommends taking these steps before undergoing cosmetic procedures:

Research specific procedures by visiting reputable Web sites such as the American Society of Plastic Surgeons at www.plasticsurgery.org or the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery at: www.surgery.org/index.php for information. Make notes and questions to discuss during consultations with surgeons.

If you and your doctor are considering a new or unfamiliar procedure, ask whether it's FDA-approved and if any credible medical journals have published peer-reviewed research of the procedure. You can visit the library for copies of the cited articles.

Ask your surgeon for his credentials. Any physician licensed to perform surgery can legally hang out a shingle and call himself

Conway found Shapiro on the Internet, and though she met with and questioned the doctor extensively before the surgery, she was unable to obtain a second opinion because she couldn't find another nearby doctor who performs the technique. Only about 500 doctors in the country perform mesotherapy.

Board certified plastic surgeon Dr. Allen Rosen said there's a reason for that.

"The problem is, there are no standard agents being used in the mixtures," said Rosen, an assistant clinical professor of plastic and reconstructive surgery at UMDNJ and co-author of *Beauty in Balance: A Common Sense Approach to Cosmetic Surgery and Treatments*.

According to reports, formulations have been found to include drugs used to treat asthma and heart disease, as well as antibiotics, novocain, vitamin C and controversial herbs such as yohimbe, which is purported to be an analgesic and aphrodisiac.

Rosen noted that no controlled studies of the mesotherapy have been performed in the United States. As a result, most physician refuse to perform it.

"We don't know if it's effective, and, if it is, what the body does with the fat once it's melted."

Too good to be true?

Mesotherapy isn't the only marketed cosmetic procedure that plastic surgeons raise concerns about. According to Rosen and other specialists, it's not unusual to see patients who express regrets about undergoing very new or unproven cosmetic surgeries and procedures.

a cosmetic surgeon, Back said. They may not have the training to get the best result, however. You want to look for a board-certified plastic surgeon. You can check through the ASPS.

Determine your surgeon's training and experience with a particular procedure. You want to choose a surgeon with enough practical experience to navigate potential problems. Ask for references and photos of their work.

Ask about a procedure's limitations and potential complications. A surgeon who only sells the benefits is over-promising results.

Listen to your surgeon's recommendations, even if you think you know what procedure you want. Patients often confuse the benefits of particular cosmetic procedures. For example, botox injections are for lines around the eyes, but they won't do anything for bags.

Consult your plastic surgeon at least twice before deciding to undergo a procedure. A second consultation will allow you to clear up any questions or misinterpreted information.

Take a few weeks or months to sleep on your decision before scheduling surgery. You may learn new information that could alter your decision during that time.

-- Shawn Rhea

"The problem today is you have a number of patients seeking plastic surgery, and the industry is booming," said Dr. Zachary Gerut, a Long Island, N.Y., plastic surgeon who said he has had occasions to perform corrective or more effective surgery on patients. "Some surgeons over-promise results with advertising they can't live up to."

But aside from over-promising results, some procedures lack sufficient research or are simply too newly approved for patients to undergo without significant consideration and investigation, said Dr. Gary Brownstein, a Cherry Hill-based plastic surgeon.

"There's always a bunch of new things that come out but that doesn't mean they're good, efficacious or safe," Brownstein said.

Even when a new cosmetic procedure has been FDA approved, Brownstein said it's a good idea for patients to wait and see what its long-term, real-life results are before becoming guinea pigs. That's because many unexpected problems arise once a procedure or product hits the market and a range of patients with different body types and health concerns undergo or use it.

Thread lifts

Some plastic surgeons point to the widely touted thread face-lift as an example. The thread lift hit the American market a couple of years ago, and has been praised as a less-invasive procedure that requires fewer incisions and offers faster recovery time than tradition face-lifts. Many doctors are marketing the FDA-approved procedure as the "lunchtime lift," telling patients they can go back to work the same day.

For the procedure, a plastic surgeon makes small incisions on each side of the hairline then threads a barbwire-like suture along the sides of the face and under the chin to tighten facial skin.

While the thread lift proved successful in studies, and was said to last as long as more invasive face-lifts (about 10 years), in real life it's proving to be less effective, according to Rosen.

"We're now seeing it last about one to two years," acknowledged Rosen, who does perform thread lifts. The procedure also has proved to be a poor option for some patients, particularly those with very thin skin, as the suture may protrude beneath the skin, or result in a significant amount of hanging skin or fat, as the wire can't support the tissue enough to make a significant difference. In rare cases, patients also have developed infections or painful scar tissue forming around the suture.

But the thread lift can be a good solution for some, said Rosen, namely those who aren't ready for a major lift and who have the right tissue composition.

After learning the benefits and risks, Liz Panico, 48, of Warren, believed she was just such a patient. Four months ago, she underwent a thread lift, which Rosen performed.

"I had a little bit of sagging, but wasn't ready for a full face-lift," she explained. "This will hold me over."

While she's satisfied with her results, she admitted it may not be worth the \$6,000 she spent if the lift's effects ultimately last just one or two years.

But learning the limitations of a new procedure is only possible with time, which is why Rosen and many other plastic surgeons recommends patients hold off undergoing newer procedures or using newer product.

"A lot of times, when a new technique comes out, people think, "Oh, this is the answer,' but that's not necessary true," Rosen said.