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GOODBYE LIPO, HELLO LASER

Several new technologies in the market are claiming to zap love handles and wobbly thighs without any pain or incisions. But some doctors say these are just quick-fixes, not permanent solutions

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TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Meenu, 40, had a figure most women would die for. She was even a tad underweight. But the Andheri-based personal fitness instructor was far from satisfied. The small bulges on the sides of her waist bothered her a lot. She tried yoga, pilates and cross training but the love handles refused to budge.

In August, Meenu went to a local clinic where she had to simply lie back on a bed while the doctor pulled a machine that looks like an octopus-shaped lamp with five arms towards her. He positioned one arm each about six inches above her flabby sides in mid-air and turned the machine on. A bright, red laser beam was projected onto the area.

Ten such forty-minute sessions later, Meenu walked out of the clinic sans the spare tyre. "I feel much more confident wearing body-hugging clothes now," says the mother-of-two who had opted for Zerona, a therapy that uses low-intensity laser rays to remove stubborn fat.

Zerona is just one of the new generation fat-loss technologies that have hit the Indian market in recent years. i-Lipo, Proslimelt, Vip Complex are among the others. Unlike the age-old liposuction where doctors would cut open the problem area and literally pump out the fat in the operation theatre, these newer

methods are non-invasive and have no downtime. One can literally lose bits of flab over the office lunch break.

RIGHT WAVELENGTH

Zerona, which is the newest of the technologies, employs laser rays of 634 nanometer wavelength that are focused on the target area to release triglycerides from fat cells. These are then egested through the body's natural metabolic system.

Doctors using Zerona claim the cold laser melts fat like butter. Considering the growing obsession with perfect bodys, it comes as no surprise that many are opting for the laser treatment. More than 120 individuals have undergone Zerona at AMAYA clinics in Mumbai and over 50 at the Delhi Aesthetic Centre in GK where it is also offered.

THE SOUND OF SUCCESS

i-Lipo, which employs laser like Zerona, and Proslimelt, which uses ultrasound waves to destroy fat cells, are also gaining popularity. "The demand for such body contouring techniques has increased dramatically over the past two years. It is not just models and actors. Ordinary housewives, people working in the corporate sector and men in their 50s and 60s come to us because they want to be in perfect shape," says Dr Chiranjiv Chhabra, an aesthetic laser surgeon who heads Skin Alive at Panchsheel Park. The centre introduced i-Lipo around 18 months ago and Proslimelt four years ago.

THE FAT ZAPPERS

ZERONA

Zerona employs low-level laser rays of 634 nanometer wavelength. When the doctor positions the arms of the machine above the target area, it beams the lasers into the skin till it reaches the fat cells. The rays generate a temporary hole in the fat cell, allowing the fat to seep out. It almost feels like a balloon being struck by a needle.

This fat, which is primarily in the form of triglycerides, is taken up by the body's lymphatic system and broken down into free fatty acids and glycerol. These are then small enough to enter the blood stream. Once there, they are converted into energy for the body's functioning. What is not consumed as energy is taken up by the liver where it is oxidized or re-processed for storage or excreted

out. As a result of the collapsed fat cells, the volume of the waistline, hips or thighs is reduced.

PROSLIMELT

The technology uses a precise range of low frequency ultrasound waves — 30 to 70 khz instead of 450 khz used for investigations — for fat and volume reduction. The doctor applies gel on the target area of the patient's body and moves the ultrasound transducer around the area to deliver focused ultrasound waves. The waves break open fat cells, causing the triglycerides and other cellular waste to come out in a liquefied form. These are metabolised through the natural physiological and metabolic process and come out of the body in the form of sweat, urine and stool.



I-LIPO

i-Lipo or laser lipolysis uses low level laser rays that disrupt fat cell membranes thereby releasing the fatty content. This does not affect neighbouring structures such as skin, blood vessels and nerves. The doctor places pads on the target area and then moves them to another part after ten minutes. The fatty content is used by the body in the same fashion as it is with Proslimelt.

VIP COMPLEX

This 'miracle' machine provides solutions to a host of aesthetic problems like excess fat, cellulite, sagging skin, stretch marks, varicose veins, wrinkles, fluid retention and ageing skin. The machine uses infrared rays to dissolve fat in specific areas and induces directional waves that firm body muscles and tissues, making the area taut at the same time.



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Zerona and i-Lipo, which are approved by the US-FDA, and Proslimelt, which has got the nod of the CIE in Europe, are a rage in the West considering they claim to do what no diet or marathons on the treadmill can — spot reduction. They can make the saddlebags (fat around hips, things and butts) and bingo wings (flabby upper arms) vanish without any pain or the risks of conventional surgery, according to claims. No wonder then that they are considered the "intelligent alternative to liposuction".

NOT FOR THE OBESE

But these fat zappers are not meant for the obese since they do not address the cause of weight gain or cure it. They are ideally suited for people who are slightly overweight (with a BMI of less than 30) or those who have achieved the perfect body weight but have reserves of stubborn fat that just won't go as well as for individuals who are not fit for surgery due to chronic conditions like diabetes.

In India, the abdomen, love handles, thighs, buttocks and hips are the top four problem zones, in that order. And, the steep cost is no deterrent. Each session of Zerona, i-Lipo or Proslimelt costs between Rs 5,000 and 10,000 and one needs to undergo at least six to eight sessions to see results.

Practitioners claim the procedures have a high success rate. Dr Deepak Chaturvedi, who runs AMAYA, says 90 of his 120 patients in Mumbai lost the lumps and bumps. "We see an average weight loss of 10 inches in a total of six areas over ten sessions," he says.

Dr Chhabra claims her patients lose up to five inches per body part within five sessions of Proslimelt. Interestingly, trials

of Zerona and Proslimelt abroad have shown a more modest average loss of 3.65 inches and four inches respectively.

YOU STILL HAVE TO EXERCISE

And, here's the other catch: The new technologies are not a way to escape dieting and gymming. After Zerona and i-Lipo sessions, the doctors make the patient sweat it out on the treadmill at the clinic itself or walk home so all the fat is drained out of the cells. And, patients have to follow a strict, low-carbohydrate diet to ensure the inches they have knocked off don't come back. A clinic trial of Zerona, sponsored by Erchonia which manufactures this machine, showed that while the laser reduced the circumference of the patients' waists and hips by about an inch, and a bit less around their thighs, they regained about 0.31 inches across the body parts two



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weeks after the treatment's completion. This study was published in December 2009. The researchers were not sure what caused this increase in volume, but believe it could have been from swelling or from the addition of new fat cells.

But Meenu is not worried. "I watch my diet and work out regularly. People who are not serious will regain no matter what method they use to lose fat," she says.

The new-age technologies may have got the vote of body-conscious city-dwellers like her, but a section of doctors are still skeptical about their efficacy. "It (Proslimelt) does theoretically burn a little fat, but this is very superficial, cutaneous (just in the skin) loss. It comes back if you do not exercise or control your diet," says Dr Chander Lulla, a senior radiologist and ultrasound expert attached to Jaslok Hospital in Mumbai.

"It is a quick-fix rather than a permanent solution," Lulla says it is better to lose weight by changing one's lifestyle and

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eating habits since that is more sustainable.

Dr Mahesh Mangal, who heads the cosmetic surgery department at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, agrees. "The new technologies can sculpt the body a bit but they are not very effective," he says. "The best way to lose fat is the natural way and if that doesn't work, one can go for a proper liposuction or bariatric surgery in case the patient is obese and has medical complications."

Doctors are also concerned about the long-term side effects of the fat dissolvers as the techniques are fairly new. Moreover, studies have also not been conducted to see how much exposure to ultrasound and laser, even if it is of low intensity, is safe. There is currently no cap on the number of sessions a patient can opt for. And note this: while the company that manufactures Zerona recommends six sessions, doctors in India and Malaysia prescribe 10 sessions of the laser therapy.

Is this safe? And, what if the patient goes to the clinic for multiple such 10-session treatments? The answers to these questions are yet to be found. For now, Dr Chaturvedi says he does not recommend more than 16 to 24 sessions in a row since the body gets "too used to the treatment" rendering it ineffective.

Interestingly, almost as many patients opt for surgical liposuction at Fos Laser Spa in Delhi as others who opt for Proslimelt or Vip Complex, says Jessica Sethi, operations manager. The jury is still out on whether these new tools work or not — there are as many good reviews online as there are bad — but even the wee bit of inch loss is enough to keep the patients happy and the cash registers ringing at slimming clinics. ■