

Everything You Need to Know About Liposuction Surgery

In this month's "Life in Plastic" column, plastic surgeons break down the invasive procedure including how it *really* works, the approximate recovery time, and the common misconceptions every prospective patient should know.

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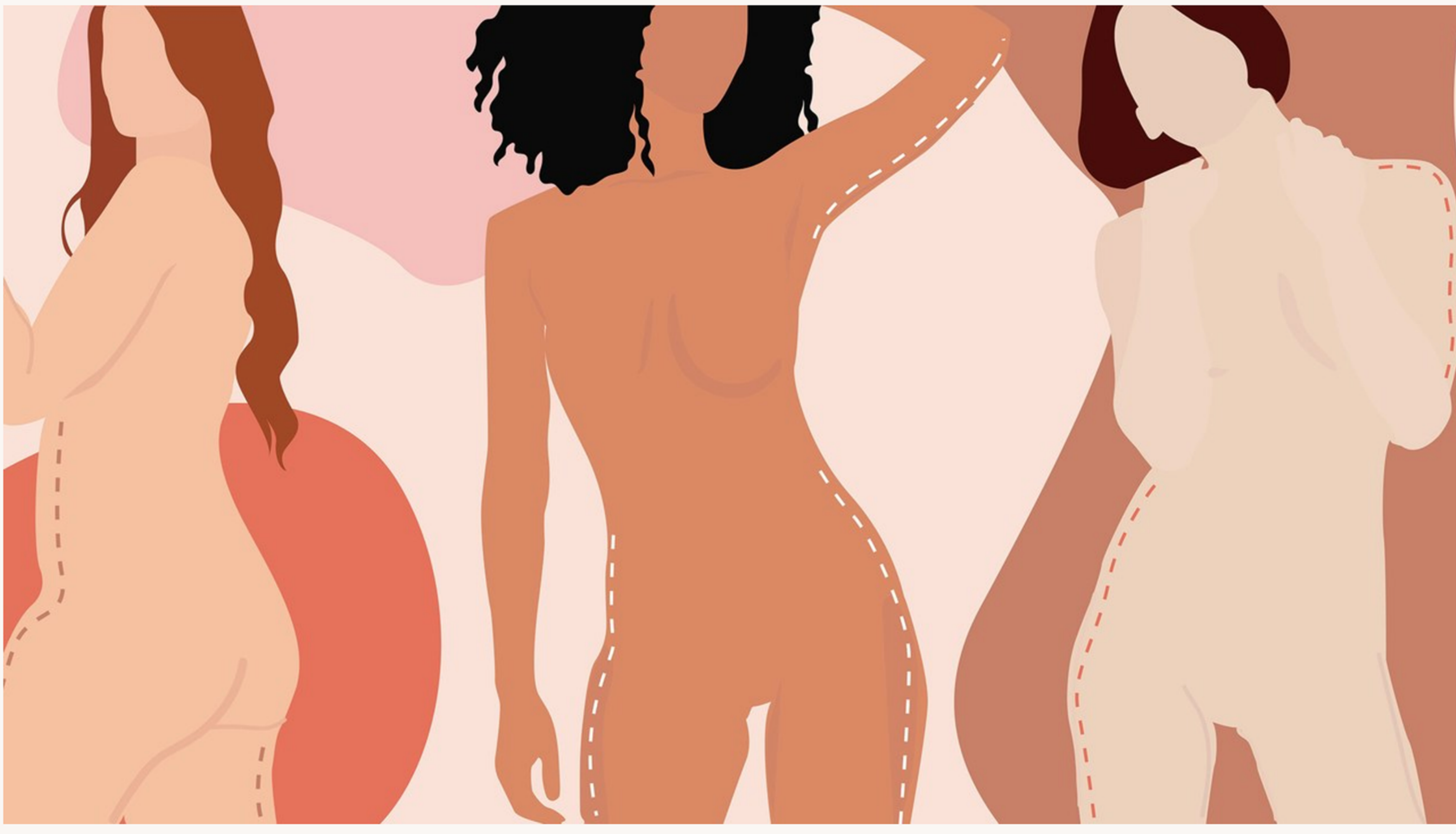


Illustration by Brittany Theophilus

*Interest in plastic surgery is at an all-time high, but stigma and misinformation still surround the industry and its patients. Welcome to **Life in Plastic**, a series by Allure that provides all the information you'll need to make whatever decision is right for your body — no judgment, just the facts. Here, we're covering everything you need to know about liposuction. **Note: This article discusses fat-reduction procedures and contains before-and-after images of nude and semi-nude patients who have undergone liposuction surgery.***

If you're considering **liposuction**, you're not alone: More than 250,000 patients opted for the procedure last year, according to a **report published by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons**, up 5 percent from 2017. With the leaps in technology, liposuction isn't nearly as invasive, painful, or time-consuming as it used to be, and it's often way more effective than noninvasive procedures. From the first consultation to the final result, here's everything you can expect with a liposuction procedure.

The Consultation

The most important aspect of a good consultation, according to New York City-based, board-certified plastic surgeon **Adam Kolker** is for the individual to "express their desires with regard to the ideal outcome they're looking for" and for the surgeon to evaluate whether that goal is achievable.

A physical examination is conducted including an assessment of the skin's elasticity because liposuction "does one thing — it removes fat," says New York City-based board-certified plastic surgeon **Norman Rowe**. So it's critical that the patient "realizes what they're getting...within the restraints of their body," meaning that "if someone's got loose skin or laxity of their muscle, liposuction isn't going to do much."

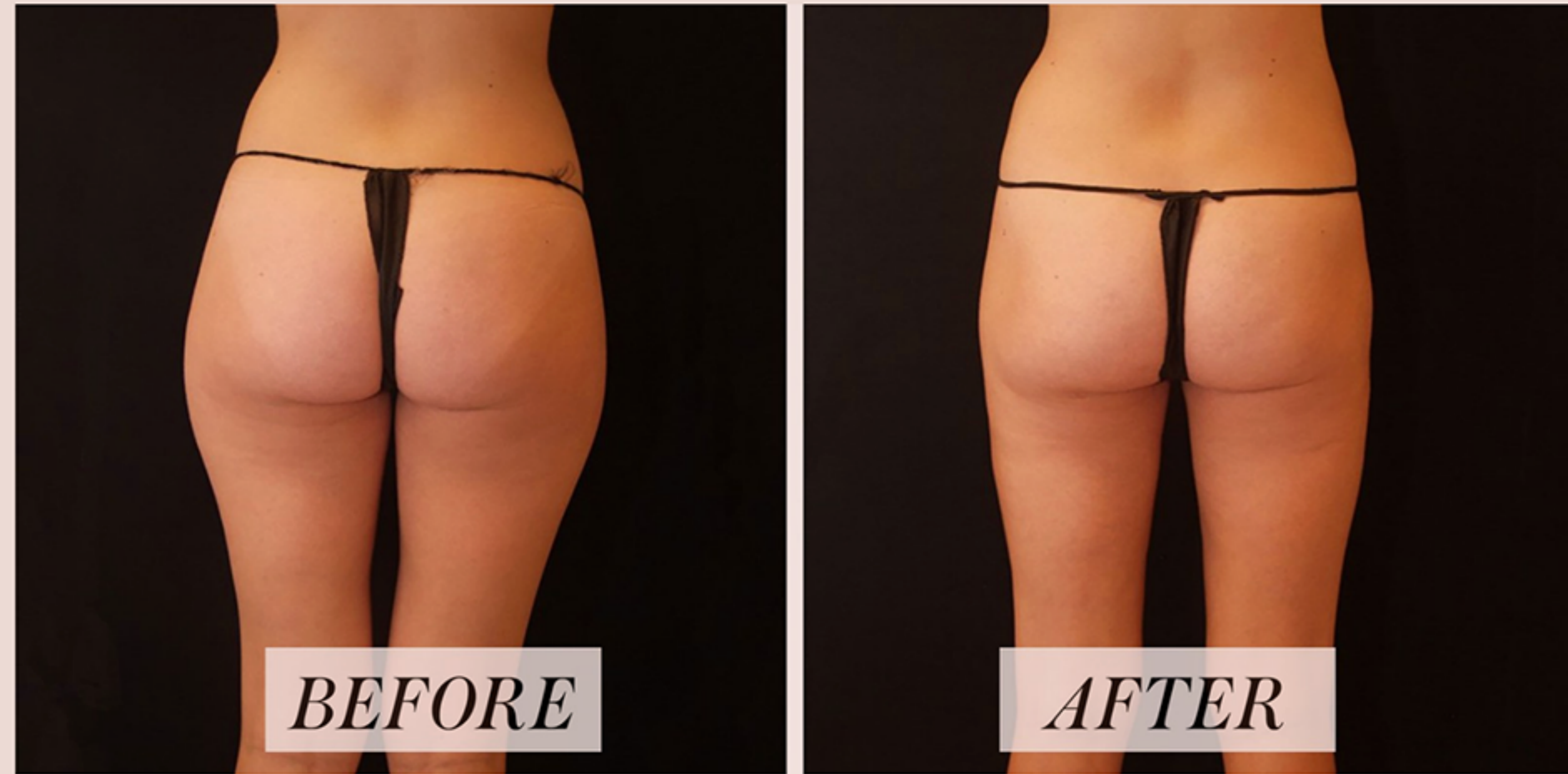
After the exam, a frank conversation about realistic expectations and outcomes should be discussed and "really need to be carefully managed," says Kolker. Patients can also expect to learn the specifics about the procedure including details on anesthesia options, recovery, and post-op care.

The "Ideal" Candidate for Liposuction

Matthew Nykiel, a board-certified plastic surgeon in California, says that any patient who is "medically healthy and has fat in areas they want removed" is a good candidate for liposuction, but as a general rule it should not be a substitute for diet and exercise.

Liposuction, according to Kolker should only be performed when a patient is "at or close to their ideal body weight" and the area "just simply doesn't respond to diet and exercise."

The most effectively treated areas **are the tummy** and outer thighs, but "the absolute best" areas are the back tailbone area and the waist because "we are really trying to create curves in the body," says Nykiel, while areas with thinner skin like the upper arm or inner thigh, or places with a high concentration of nerves, like the face or cheeks, are not great options for liposuction. The front of the thighs and butt are also rarely liposuctioned, because "if someone feels like they have a full buttock, it's usually not due to fat," says Rowe, it's muscle and liposuction "does not remove muscle."



Courtesy of Adam Kolker

The Preparation

Although liposuction has become a routine outpatient procedure it still requires moderate, manageable preparation to enable the body to bounce back quickly and effectively. Nykiel asks his patients to lay off smoking — tobacco and otherwise — for at least four weeks before the surgery and pause on alcohol and edibles the week before. Products with blood-thinning impacts like aspirin, Advil, Motrin, Aleve, and even red wine and garlic should be avoided for two weeks prior to surgery.

It's also important to maintain your lifestyle and not gain or lose weight beforehand as doctors want "to treat you at your [current] weight," says Nykiel. "A lot of it really is art in the form of sculpting," which means your surgeon formulates a customized surgery plan and expects to "execute that plan, so right before surgery is not a good time to be rapidly gaining weight or rapidly losing weight because that is just going to throw off what we're trying to sculpt and it could impact the results," he explains.

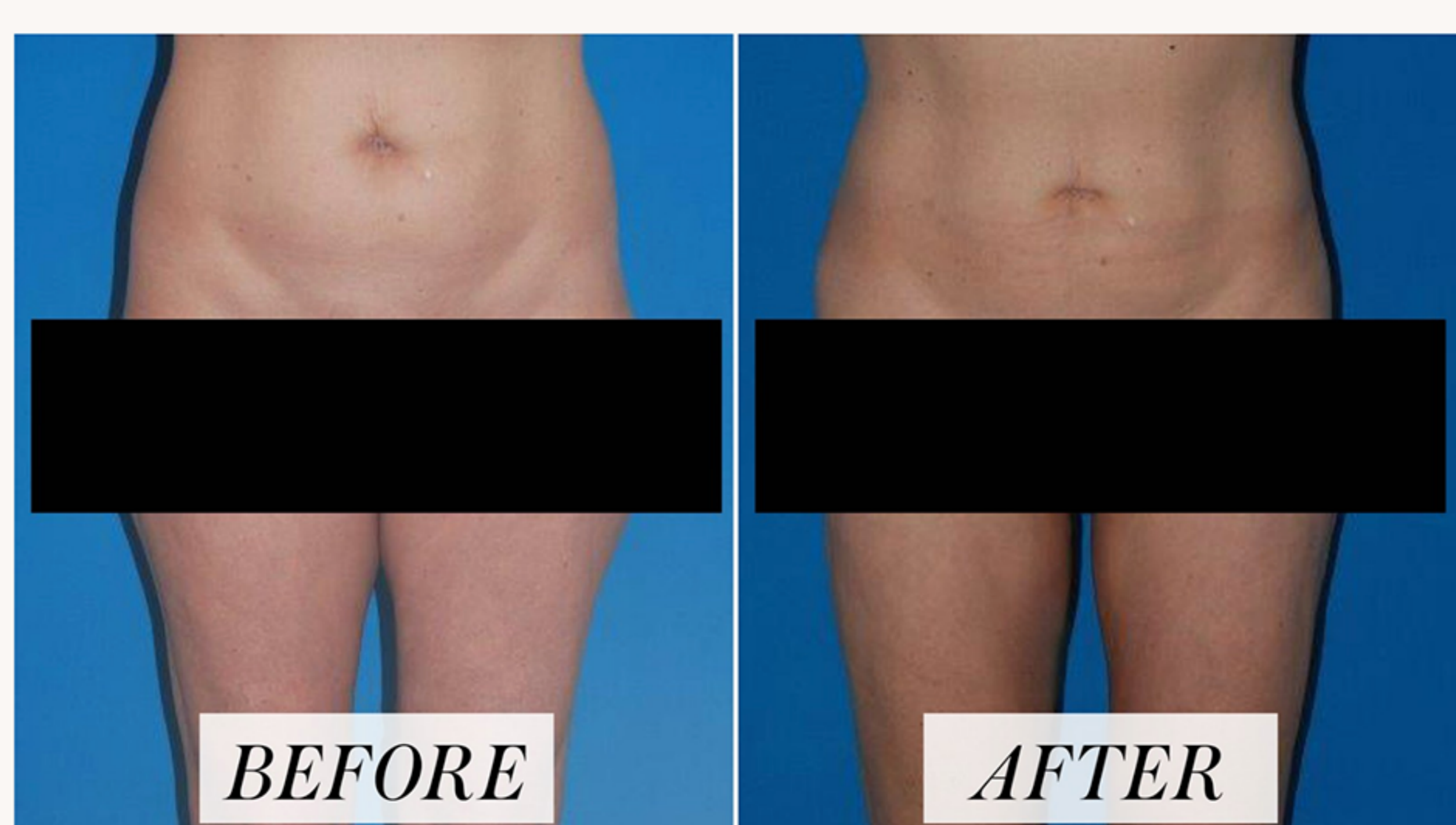
The Procedure

Liposuction is an outpatient procedure and performed under local or general anesthesia depending on the number of areas, the quantity of fat removed, and each patient's individual squeamish tolerance. "When we're talking about multiple areas or larger volumes, we want to consider an individual's comfort," says Kolker. "Some people simply don't want to be awake during the procedure."

Local anesthesia comes in the form of a numbing injection similar to lidocaine or breathable nitrous oxide, which is commonly used in dentists' offices. Both forms of anesthesia tend to be used for smaller, localized areas like the flanks or upper thighs, while general anesthesia is typically saved for patients looking to have more than two areas liposuctioned or more than five liters of fat removed, says San Francisco-based, board-certified plastic surgeon **Carolyn Chang**.

Prior to surgery, the area to be treated is sterilized and the patient is draped in a surgical gown. Epinephrine, a medication to reduce bleeding and loosen the fat, is injected into the areas to be liposuctioned, enabling surgeons to perform the procedure with "a little less trauma, a lot less bruising, and a faster recovery," says Chang.

Two or more tiny incisions "in the neighborhood of five or six millimeters" each are made to "allow us to more uniformly sculpt the area," says Kolker. "It minimizes the chances of divots, indentations, or irregularities in the skin or soft tissue."



Courtesy of Carolyn Chang

To perform the procedure, surgeons insert a cannula (a long, thin tube that is literally hooked "to a vacuum machine," says Chang), into the incisions and "you suck the fat out." The incisions are then closed and patients are "immediately put in a compression garment," which feels like "medical-grade Spanx" and helps to "get that swelling down as quickly as possible," says Nykiel.

Patients who had their torsos liposuctioned will also wear a corset-like Velcro binder on top of the compression garment for two weeks. The compression garment "comes off after six" for Nykiel's patients, but isn't medically necessary to achieve the final outcome. "The result you're going to get, I got in the operating room," explains Rowe. "The garment helps bring the swelling down a lot sooner."

After spending an hour or two in the recovery room while the anesthesia wears off, patients return home the same day.

The Risks

All surgeries with anesthesia carry risks, although complications related to anesthesia are considered "extraordinarily small" and liposuction is accepted as a very safe procedure, with contour irregularities being the most common disappointment for patients.

"One of the things that people tend to see as one of the risks is not so much any of the real medical issues like bleeding or infection, but more along the lines of expectation," says Kolker.

Dimples, divots, and unevenness can sometimes appear in patients who have been over-liposuctioned and according to Kolker, the preventative solution "is for the surgeon to do the procedure in the safest, most conservative way possible."

Temporary side effects including numbness and bruising are less frequent as doctor technique and medical technology and devices improve, but despite the elasticity evaluation during the consult, the way skin bounces back from the sudden loss of density can sometimes be unpredictable, leaving the patient with less fat, but the same amount of skin.

"You have to remember you're taking the fat out from under the skin," explains Chang. "And you have to rely on the skin itself to shrink back."

Recovery and Downtime

Length and intensity of the recovery depend on several factors: the type of anesthesia administered, the number of areas addressed, and the amount of fat removed. Patients who received small, localized liposuction can return to work and most activities "somewhere in the neighborhood of 48 to 72 hours," says Kolker.

Liposuction recovery is "very manageable" assures Rowe, who likens it to the "worst workout soreness you'll ever have," although the more extensive lipectomy procedures naturally have a longer downtime, ranging from four to seven days as patients are "getting over the anesthetic side effects." But most people only "take pain medication around the clock for just a couple of days," says Chang.



Courtesy of Carolyn Chang

Bruising is uncommon but possible. Moderate swelling should be expected and in fact "can actually increase over the course of 7 to 14 days," says Kolker, but it's reduced by wearing the compression garments consistently. Final swelling settles "probably somewhere between three and six months."

Patients can return to light workouts after 7 to 10 days while still wearing the compression garments, but should avoid high-impact cardio until after the post-op appointment. All incisions leave scars, albeit very small ones, and surgeons, Nykiel says, usually "hide the incisions in inconspicuous places, like the bikini line or belly button."

Additional Benefits of Liposuction

"One thing we do quite a bit with liposuction is fat grafting," says Rowe. For patients considering a more natural rejuvenation procedure down the road, liposuction is the perfect opportunity to "take that fat, clean it, store it, and then reinject it in their body wherever they want," some popular areas being the hands, face, penis, and buttocks. As Rowe succinctly explains: "Fat is the ultimate filler."

Another benefit of liposuction is the efficiency of the procedure, especially when compared to popular noninvasive fat-reduction treatments, which require multiple sessions and several months for visible results. Liposuction is usually a "one-and-done" procedure, says Rowe, and as Chang says to her patients, "small procedures with small recoveries give you small results."

The Cost

According to 2018 data from the **American Society of Plastic Surgeons**, the average cost of liposuction is \$3,518, with several variables, including geographic location, surgeon demand and fee, anesthesia fees, hospital or surgical facility costs, medical tests, post-surgery garments, and prescription costs. Liposuction is not usually covered by health insurance plans.