The Most Overrated Cosmetic Procedures

Dermatologists tell us the trendy procedures that don't deliver—and which are downright risky.

by **JOLENE EDGAR** SEP 23, 2016

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Overrated. As any slumping all-star could attest, there is, perhaps, no harsher criticism than this. In the beauty realm, it signals a caveat emptor of sorts: Let the buyer beware—these procedures *may* lack sound science, but more often they carry overblown promises and under-the-radar risks. They invite inflated expectations (thank you, social media). As one doctor put it, Overrated is in the eye of the beholder. Thus, managing preconceptions is everything: Hope for a homerun, prepare for a single (or even a really expensive whiff).

Here, we reality-check the hype surrounding four buzzed-about cosmetic treatments.

BRAZILIAN BUTT LIFT

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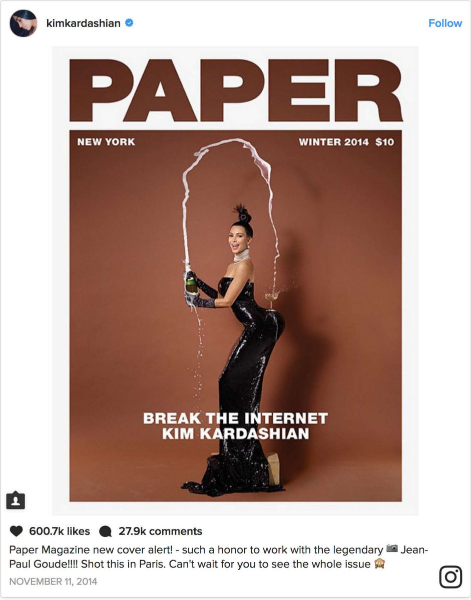

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NOVEMBER 11, 2014

The Hype: Back in the winter of 2014 Kim K. "broke the internet" with her cover of *Paper* magazine. In the year that followed, butt lift procedures jumped 32 percent, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. Coincidence? We think not.

The Reality: Removing fat cells from one part of the body (via lipo) and transferring them to the derrière certainly sounds like a win-win—goodbye saddlebags, hello party in the back—but the procedure doesn't guarantee an internet-breaking booty (despite the $10K+ price tag). For starters, "fat is very sensitive to any kind of injury—just the manipulation involved in taking it from one area, spinning it down, and reinjecting it elsewhere can compromise fragile fat cells," says Dendy Engelman, a derm in New York City.

Even if handled with the utmost care, fat is notoriously unpredictable. And "the more fat cells you try to transfer, the less 'take' you ultimately get," says New York City plastic surgeon Adam Kolker, who does not perform or support this operation. When transferring fat, he explains, "you want an intimate relationship between each fat cell and the blood supply in the area it's being placed. In the soft tissue of the buttocks, where blood supply is rather limited, results rarely last more than a year," he says. Any initial volume boost comes mainly from post-procedural swelling, and benign cysts that form as the non-viable fat is dying off.

Meet the Woman Who Has Every Plastic Surgeon on Speed Dial

NON-SURGICAL FAT REDUCTION

coolsculpting
CoolCare

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The Hype: Sans scalpel or syringe, doctors can quickly and permanently shrink bulges by destroying fat cells with extreme cold, heat, ultrasound, or radiofrequency energy.

The Reality: None of the above is false or even slightly exaggerated. The main reason docs count non-invasive fat-busters among the overhyped is simply because "people have unrealistic expectations," says New York City derm Paul Jarrod Frank. With the more popular, well-proven devices like CoolSculpting, SculpSure, and BTL Vanquish ME, "you can expect to lose about 15 to 20 percent of the treated fat layer, which is a pinch-an-inch kind of thing, but many patients think these tools will remove, like, 80 percent of fat—and they're inevitably disappointed." However, for the young mom-of-three hoping to "wear her favorite dress without two pairs of Spanx, these devices can be life-changing," says Ranella Hirsch, a dermatologist in Boston. (That said, she adds, one might look at her before and after photos and be utterly "unimpressed.")

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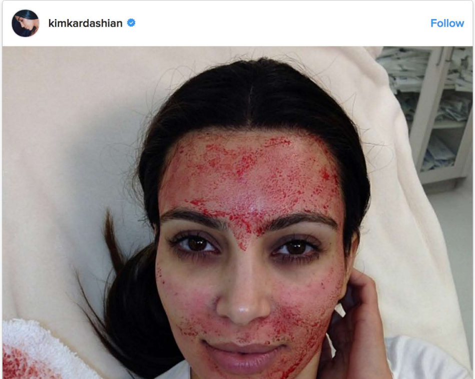
In the case of CoolSculpting, arguably the most prominent and thoroughly studied of the bunch, "there are new applicators coming out regularly, which allow us to treat more areas on a wider range of body types and in less time," says Heidi Waldorf, a dermatologist in New York City. Still, she notes, the model candidate is five to 10 pounds above her ideal weight, and aiming to zap specific areas that haven't responded to exercise. All of these devices demand a series of treatments ($1,000-$3,500 each), and generally take six to 12 weeks to deliver. Results are permanent—injured fat cells, once flushed out of the body, cannot grow back. Realize, however, that if you gain weight post-treatment, remaining fat cells can expand in size.

PRP THERAPY (A.K.A. VAMPIRE FACIAL OR FACELIFT)



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MARCH 10, 2013

The Hype: Blood nourishes vampires; vampires are ageless Viking gods à la Eric Northman; therefore applying or injecting one's own blood-derived platelet-rich plasma (PRP) will cause collagen to flourish (courtesy of growth factors in the blood), making us forever young and babelicious.

The Reality: "PRP is like the wild, wild West right now," says Dr. Engelman. "People use the term for a lot of different things, the treatment protocols aren't standardized, and, at this point, we cannot promise consistent results." With roots in dentistry and orthopedics, true PRP therapy involves drawing several teaspoons of blood from one's arm, spinning it down in a centrifuge to separate out the golden-hued platelets, then reinjecting them (into joints, skin, scalp) to trigger a healing response. But "there is no science—not one study, nothing—behind putting blood on the skin during microneedling," says Dr. Frank, alluding to Kim Kardashian's televised "vampire facial" in 2013. In the fields of dermatology and plastic surgery, he adds, PRP's only proven efficacy is for certain types of hair loss. (He treats female pattern hair loss with PRP therapy, explaining "it helps thicken existing hair but cannot fill in bald spots.")

As for shooting PRP into sun-damaged skin? While it's certainly not going to deliver a facelift effect, Karyn Grossman, a dermatologist with offices in Beverly Hills and Manhattan, says it may help reduce fine lines in the thin-skinned eye area by gradually thickening the skin. But it's not cheap or without downtime, and as Dr. Frank points out, "the results will never come close to that of Botox, fillers, or lasers." Also worth noting: "The act of injecting PRP for cosmetic reasons—whether for thinning hair or collagen stimulation—is not FDA-approved," says dermatologist Joshua Zeichner, who does not perform the procedure in his New York office.

What Old Hollywood Stars Did Pre-Plastic-Surgery

SKIN TIGHTENING (THERMAGE, ULTHERAPY, EXILIS)

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The Hype: It's like a facelift without the downtime and telltale scars!

The Reality: These surgery-sparing tools send energy (radiofrequency or ultrasound) deep into the dermis to rev up collagen production. They can lift the brow and eyelids, tighten saggy necks, sharpen a jaw line, and help smooth out folds around the mouth. While popular with 40- and 50-somethings, derms also use them preventatively on younger folks, since thickening the skin in this way can stave off laxity and wrinkles. But, again, a successful outcome hinges on realistic goals, as results are neither immediate nor dramatic. "My Ultherapy patients leave happy because they're clear on what the studies show—that the desired lifting happens in the majority of cases, but not all, and that it's on the order of one to two millimeters," says New York City derm Robert Anolik. "That's a small amount, but when done diffusely, the skin looks firmer, lifted, and younger." (He charges $3000 to $6500 to treat the full face and neck.)

Dr. Frank equates the payoff of skin tightening to a good-hair day—"something you notice, but the rest of the world may not." Of course, a kickass blowout doesn't usually mandate numbing cream and pain killers. "These treatments can be very painful—like, painful beyond what people think," says Dr. Hirsch. As in: Plan on taking medication and having someone drive you home. A newer, milder radiofrequency machine, the Exilis, is supposedly more tolerable than one-and-done devices, like Thermage and Ultherapy, but requires multiple sessions.

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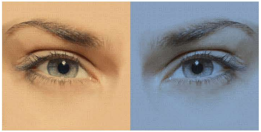

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