

USA
TODAY

Life

TUESDAY, MARCH 23, 1999

HEALTH & BEHAVIOR

Body's recycled fat
smooths aging process

Harvested excess is safer, longer-lasting than collagen

By Elizabeth Snead
USA TODAY

Ever look in the mirror and think it might be time for a little nip or tuck?

Relax. You might just need a good fat-recycling plan.

Fat is becoming an increasingly popular weapon in the fight against the ravages of time.

Gently harvested from pudgy thighs, dimpled buttocks and paunchy tummies, fat is being reinjected into aging, wrinkled faces to re-create a full, youthful look.

Plastic surgeons and dermatologists commonly use liposuction leftovers as filler to fill hollow cheeks and nasolabial folds (deepening crevices from the nose down the sides of mouth), to plump up shrinking lips and narrow jaw lines, and to erase forehead lines and eye crinkles. Fat even plumps up aging, tendony hands.

"Fat transfer is part of an evolution in facial rejuvenation," says Neal Handel, a Los Angeles plastic surgeon. "If you look at a young face, it's round, not angular and hollow. Think of a face as a balloon. When the balloon loses air, it wrinkles and sags."

That's where fat comes in. "As we age, our faces become smaller," explains Sydney Coleman, a Manhattan plastic surgeon and pioneer in the technique he calls "lipostructure."

"Cheeks, chin, jaw, forehead diminish, and underlying fat, muscle and connective tissues atrophy, leaving skin unsupported," he says.

These doctors are among a growing group for whom the old technique of facial rejuvenation (pulling skin tighter and tighter around eyes, necks and faces) no longer makes sense.

"Erasing the signs of aging is not just removing bags, jowls, wrinkles or folds," Coleman says. "It's adding back the fullness found in youth."

With your own fat, there is no risk of allergic reactions (as with collagen) or rejection and

removal problems (with Gore-tex or silicone).

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fat transfer, although initially more time-consuming (one to two hours) than collagen, is more cost-effective. Fat transfer costs from \$1,200 for nasolabial lines or lips to \$15,000 for a full-face rejuvenation (cheeks, chin, jaw, eyes, lips).

Fat transfer is not new. It's been tried for decades but was controversial because the survival of the fragile fat was usually short-lived.

Coleman is credited with inventing the now widely used, kinder, gentler methods (and equipment) of harvesting, refining and injecting fat.

"When I started doing liposuction in '82, I noticed prob-

lems with fat transfer," Coleman says. "The high-suction removal destroyed fat, almost boiling it. Refining used to expose the fat to air, which caused decomposition, and squirting fat through tiny sharp needles also damaged it."

In 1986 Coleman devised methods of harvesting using a small nonsuction tube and reinjecting with a blunt needle (like the one used to inflate a basketball).

Instead of shoving in big lumps of fat, Coleman found that layering it in droplets, like tapioca, anchored it to tissues and provided good blood supply.

Today his lipostructure techniques — which include adding fat to enhance lips and fill in hollow upper and lower eyelids and overchiseled noses, even



Three years and seven months after one infiltration into the lips and chin without other treatments around the mouth

Patient of Sydney Reese Coleman, MD

Lip service: Photographs illustrate a patient before, top, and after a procedure called structural augmentation, in which fat is injected to plump up lips and jaw lines and to erase age lines.



Three years & seven months after only one procedure of structural fat to the lower eyelid shows remarkable smoothing of wrinkles.

Patient of Sydney Coleman, MD

doing full-face rejuvenation by filling in cheeks and nasolabial folds and lowering jaw lines to disguise turkey necks — show results that last up to five years.

According to Indiana University professor and dermatologist C. William Hanke, president of the International Society of Dermatological Surgery, there are two types of fat-transfer procedures.

One is the method pioneered by Coleman, which requires several weeks' recovery after multiple subcutaneous injections of fat. This surgery is done under general anesthesia and can take several hours. The patient will look unsightly for seven to 10 days and swollen for two to three months, depending on how much fat is transferred and to where.

After both procedures, the patient experiences swelling, bruising and minor discomfort from harvest and injection sites. But risk of infection is minimal because of the gentler harvesting techniques and emphasis on sterile procedures and equipment (the fat is never exposed to air).

"This is a very safe procedure," Hanke says. "Infection is highly uncommon."

Physicians can "harvest" 20 to 100 cubic centimeters of fat from thighs, tummies and buttocks in one session. Comparable plump up collagen injections would cost \$7,000 to \$35,000.

Most surgeons agree that fat transfer will never eliminate the traditional face lift. But fat recycling can buy time or be a useful adjunct to such a skin-tightening procedure.



Full Face on patient after structural fat placement to the Forehead, Lower Eyelids, Cheeks, Lips, Jawline and Chin

Three years and seven months after one fatty infiltration into the lips



Abbreviated version of original article