

# What You Need To Know About CoolSculpting

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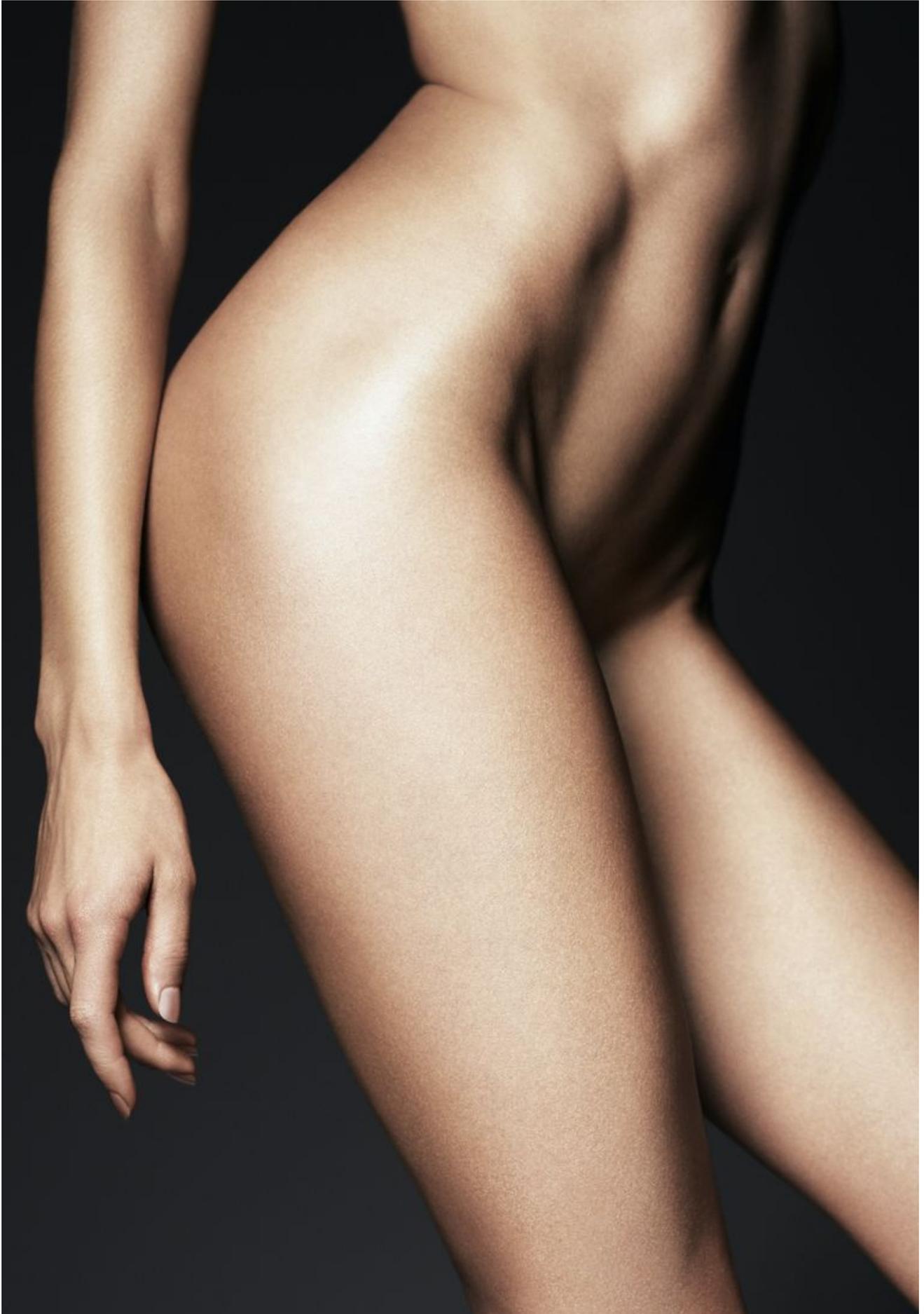
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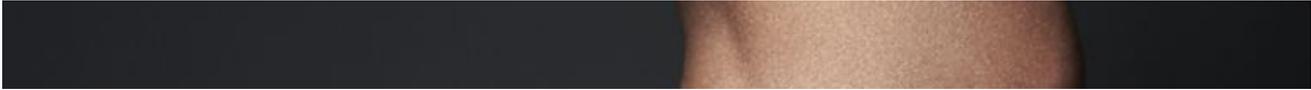
Model Linda Evangelista claims the fat freezing treatment left her permanently scarred. Experts weigh in.



By Gina Way

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In office cosmetic treatments can be a touchy subject. Some view them as essential acts of self care, others see these procedures intrinsically linked to achieving unrealistic beauty standards. No matter how you feel, noninvasive treatments like Botox, fillers, lasers and body contouring devices are undeniably popular right now.

CoolSculpting is one of those treatments. The fat-freezing procedure may sound like futuristic wizardry, but it's actually been around for more than a decade. The device initially received FDA clearance in 2010 as a non-surgical fat-reduction treatment for love handles and is now approved to treat belly and bra fat, pockets on the thighs, buttocks, and arms, and even chub under your chin. Basically anywhere there's fat, CoolSculpting is there to give it the (very) cold shoulder: It's the only FDA-cleared, noninvasive fat-freezing device on the market, and according to Harvard Medical School, there have been over eight million treatments performed worldwide.

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But lately, the treatment has been in the news for all the wrong reasons. Supermodel Linda Evangelista recently filed a lawsuit against Zeltique Aesthetics Inc., the manufacturer of the CoolSculpting device, because in 2016, the 90s-era icon developed a condition known as paradoxical adipose hyperplasia (PAH) after having multiple CoolSculpting treatments. (PAH is when the fat in treated areas actually *increases*, and that fat is a dense, enlarged, and lumpy mass.) It's a side effect that, while rare, is truly disturbing. Evangelista said she was forced to have two corrective liposuction surgeries, which left her literally scarred.

“This is a devastating situation, and it's started an important conversation about the risks of all noninvasive procedures,” says Michelle Henry, M.D., a board-certified dermatologist in NYC. “The possible complications involved are now at the forefront.” It's a cautionary lesson: Just because something is “cosmetic” or “noninvasive” doesn't mean it can't go wrong.

So, let's get real about CoolSculpting.

## How does CoolSculpting work?

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CoolSculpting is a device that reduces stubborn pudge in specific areas by freezing fat cells through a biologic process called “cryolipolysis,” which literally means cold (*cryo*) fat (*lipo*) destruction (*lysis*). The extreme cold is able to target the subcutaneous fat layer without damaging surrounding skin because fat freezes at a higher temperature than other tissue. The frozen fat cells then crystallize, and when they start to thaw out (over the next day or two), the fat liquefies and is eliminated through the lymphatic system (you basically pee it

out). Traditional fat-removing procedures such as surgical liposuction, laser-assisted liposuction (Smartlipo), or plastic surgery are either minimally invasive or, well, surgery. While they remove fat for good, they involve more downtime, not to mention anesthesia.

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CoolSculpting, on the other hand, can legally be administered by an aesthetician at a spa or a salon, but any doctor will tell you that this medical procedure should be done by a board-certified dermatologist or plastic surgeon to be on the safe side. While it is noninvasive, CoolSculpting isn't as easy-peasy as getting a facial, so it's always best to have it done by a medical professional. It ain't cheap, either: Each treatment will set you back \$750 to \$1000 per area, depending on the size of the area being treated.

## What happens during a CoolSculpting treatment?

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First, a gel pad is placed over the skin to protect it, and then the applicator is vacuum-sealed on top. You sit with this contraption on for at least half an hour. "After the treatment, we massage the area to help break up the crystallized fat cells," says [Ellen Marmur, M.D.](#), board-certified dermatologist in New York. The treatment itself takes 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the size of the area being treated.

"Does it hurt?" you're asking right about now. "There's a strange suctioning feeling for the first few minutes, and the area begins to get colder as the device drives that cold temperature to your fat layer," says Marmur, who's had the treatment done on herself. "It's uncomfortable and feels weird, but I wouldn't call it painful."

## How long does it take to see results?

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Most people need two treatments to get optimal results, which is a reduction of about 26% of fat, and should start to notice the fat layer shrinking after 6 to 12 weeks. Those results typically improve for 6 months post-treatment.

## There are some side effects—and risks

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“After your treatment, you may feel a slight numbness and tingly sensation to your skin, and a soreness deeper down for about a week or two,” says Marmur. “The skin may also be red, bruised, and swollen. The area can also feel firm, but that hardness should soften up and go away within a couple days. This temporary firmness is due to the fat layer being frozen, and it’s normal.”

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The most serious potential side effect to CoolSculpting is what Evangelista unfortunately experienced: PAH, an overgrowth of new fat cells that forms in the localized treatment area—exactly the *opposite* result you were trying to achieve. It tends to occur 8 to 24 weeks after the procedure. To make matters worse, this new fat isn’t like the soft, flabby fat you had removed. It is irregular, bumpy, and dense, and you can actually *see* a bulging, lumpy mass under the skin.

It’s theorized that PAH may be due to an exaggerated wound healing response gone wild, but there is no data to prove this yet. “A keloid scar is a good analogy,” says Marmur. “This raised, large, firm scar happens when the body’s healing response goes overboard, and there’s an overgrowth of scar tissue in a localized area. It’s possible that PAH may share a similar mechanism, but we just don’t know.”

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The bottom line: “This complication could happen to anyone after a CoolSculpting procedure, and the risk factors are unknown,” says [Bruce Katz, M.D.](#), a board-certified dermatologist in New York City, who had samples of PAH fat analyzed by a pathologist to see if there was anything unusual about it. “We found out that it was normal fat cells,” he says. “There was just a large proliferation of them in one area.” To date, the medical establishment does not understand how PAH works, why it occurs, and who may be at higher risk for it. “I always tell my patients that even though a side effect is very rare, it is still possible,” says Henry. “I would rather give someone all of the information I have so she can make an educated decision than to undersell the risk. Hopefully the situation with Linda Evangelista will bring about active research on PAH, so we can get some answers.”

## But know this: PAH is pretty rare

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According to published scientific research, paradoxical adipose hyperplasia has been estimated to occur in 1 out of every 4,000 treatments, for an incidence of 0.025 percent globally. “I’ve done hundreds of CoolSculpting procedures in the past 8 or 9 years, and I’ve *never* had an incidence of PAH,” says Henry. But Katz (who chooses *not* to do CoolSculpting at his office) thinks PAH is underreported and “may be more common than once thought.” He’s successfully treated seven cases of PAH since 2018.

## How is PAH treated?

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It can usually be successfully corrected with surgical liposuction or minimally invasive laser-assisted lipo. “I have successfully treated seven cases of PAH with Smartlipo, which uses laser energy to heat up and liquify that dense fat, which is then suctioned out,” says Katz. “The patient experiences swelling for about three days afterward and has to wear a compression garment during that time to keep pressure on the area, but I’ve had excellent results, with no abnormalities or scarring of the skin.” Marmur has had one case of PAH occur after doing hundreds of CoolSculpting treatments in her office since 2012. “I treated her with a one-week course of oral steroids to offset the inflammation, and her PAH went away in about four weeks.”

## How to know if CoolSculpting is right for you

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The first thing to understand is that this technology is not meant for general weight loss. CoolSculpting works best to spot-treat stubborn problem areas that are hard to exercise away, like a little belly fat or love handles. An ideal candidate is close to her ideal body weight (give or take a couple of pounds), but can pinch an inch or two of fat in a certain spot. (Hello, muffin top.)

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Make sure that the doctor administering your treatment has a lot of experience using the device. “I recommend asking the physician how many of these procedures he or she has done, and also ask to see before and after photos,” says Katz. In addition to this important advice, don’t neglect to do your homework, and ask your doctor a ton of questions— about side effects, downtime, pain level, *everything*—during your consultation. This advice goes for *any* cosmetic procedure you’re thinking about, from fat freezing to lasers or injectables. “We *want* you to Google all the badness, and bring in a long list of questions!” says Henry.

And please, read the consent form. Every doctor will have you sign a medical intake form (with all that info about medications you take and allergies you have) and a consent form for the procedure you are going to have. “This lays out all the potential side effects and risks involved,” says Marmur. “I urge my patients to actually read every sentence, and then ask any and all questions before you sign off. You need to be your own educated advocate.” And if

you're the least bit ambivalent about doing *any* elective procedure, don't do it at all, she adds. "Listen to what your sixth sense is telling you. You just may not be ready at this time, and that's okay."

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