

Machine melts, removes fat

Liposuction device minimizes bruising, pain, but system isn't gentle on blubber

By Maria Burnham

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Although it is the most popular cosmetic surgical procedure for both men and women, industry observers say liposuction is still relatively barbaric.

But a new piece of equipment called the Vaser, which debuted in Memphis in January, claims to minimize the bruising and trauma to the body.

The Vaser, produced by Colorado-based Sound Surgical Technologies, is a second-generation ultrasonic machine, which melts fat cells before gently sucking out the liquid.

"Any patient I've ever talked to seemed very pleased," said Cathy Gilland, a registered nurse and the facility administrator for East Memphis Surgery Center, which has two machines.

The center has seen an increase in ultrasonic liposuction, also known as lipoplasty, since acquiring the Vaser in January, Gilland said.

Last year from Jan. 1 to July 31, plastic surgeons used the facility for 63 operations. This year that number has jumped to 94 in the same time period.

The ultrasonic technique is not new. Doctors here began using it around 1997. But previous machines could only melt small pockets of fat, so removing fat from a large area could be an extremely laborious task, which left the patient sore and bruised.

The machines also produced a great deal of heat at the end of the probe and it was not uncommon that a patient's skin would be accidentally burned.

But the Vaser, which was cleared for use by the FDA in September 2002, uses a larger area on its probe to melt fat, and the heat is less focused, making burns far less likely.

The system is very gentle on everything but fat, said Dr. Ronald Johnson, a Germantown plastic surgeon.

"I've been pretty pleased with it," Johnson said.

Johnson believes the machine causes fewer traumas, reducing the amount of bruising and swelling. But as with all plastic surgery there is risk, he said. Bodies react differently.

"This is trauma. Your brain wants this done, but the body thinks a truck's run over it."

In the 12,000 treatments done on the 225 Vasers in use, there have been no significant complications, according to Donald Wingerter Jr., chief executive officer for Sound Surgical.

And 95 percent of doctors do not prescribe any painkillers after the operations, he added. He believes those numbers speak volumes about the machine's efficiency.

With the Vaser, the average price for most patients to have one area done is \$4,600. Johnson estimates that is about \$350 more than the old procedure.

But Vaser is not alone on the ultrasonic market. California-based Mentor Corp. also produces a second generation machine. It is not yet in the Memphis area, although company representatives have set up machines for plastic surgeons to try.

Dr. Lou Adams, a plastic surgeon with the Plastic Surgery Group of Memphis, uses the Vaser, which he said is very efficient, but believes the Mentor machine is slightly more effective.

"The Vaser is not perfect," Adams said. "It's better (than the first generation), but I can't wait to see the third

generation."

Much of the success or failure of such operations rests with the operator, Adams said.

"It's still very much surgeon-dependant. There is still a lot of surgical judgement and surgical skill that comes into play. A bad surgeon with a good machine is still a bad surgeon."

Anyone considering liposuction or any plastic surgery should seek a surgeon certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery.

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