

Battling the bulge

Mesotherapy may help you lose unwanted inches, but how safe is it?

By ALIX STRAUSS
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

What if a few injections - okay, more like 1,000-could dissolve your saddlebags and melt your love handles?

It sounds like a cellulite sufferer's pipe dream, but that's the promise of mesotherapy, a French fatbusting technique that's gaining popularity in the U.S. Many fans of the procedure report losing up to 4 inches on their waist, hips and thighs - two dress sizes - with little pain and no suffering.

But is this blubber-melting method safe? Doctors inject their mesotherapy patients with a mix of medications that is not FDA-approved for slimming. Not only that, but each doctor's formula is different, making it even more difficult to gauge safety.

But its practitioners insist that it is a proven treatment.

"Every drug I use is approved in the U.S.," says Dr. Marion Shapiro, an osteopathic physician with an office in West Orange, N.J., and a Manhattan mesotherapy clinic. "It's completely safe."

Patients, meanwhile, rave about their new bods. "I've lost over 11 inches from my midsection," says Carolyn Buny, a 53-year-old union officer who packed on the pounds after she quit smoking (at 5-feet-2, she was up to 193). Though some said she was out of her mind to inject a foreign substance into her body, the Bronx-based Buny was desperate. "This changed my life. My skin is smooth and wonderful."

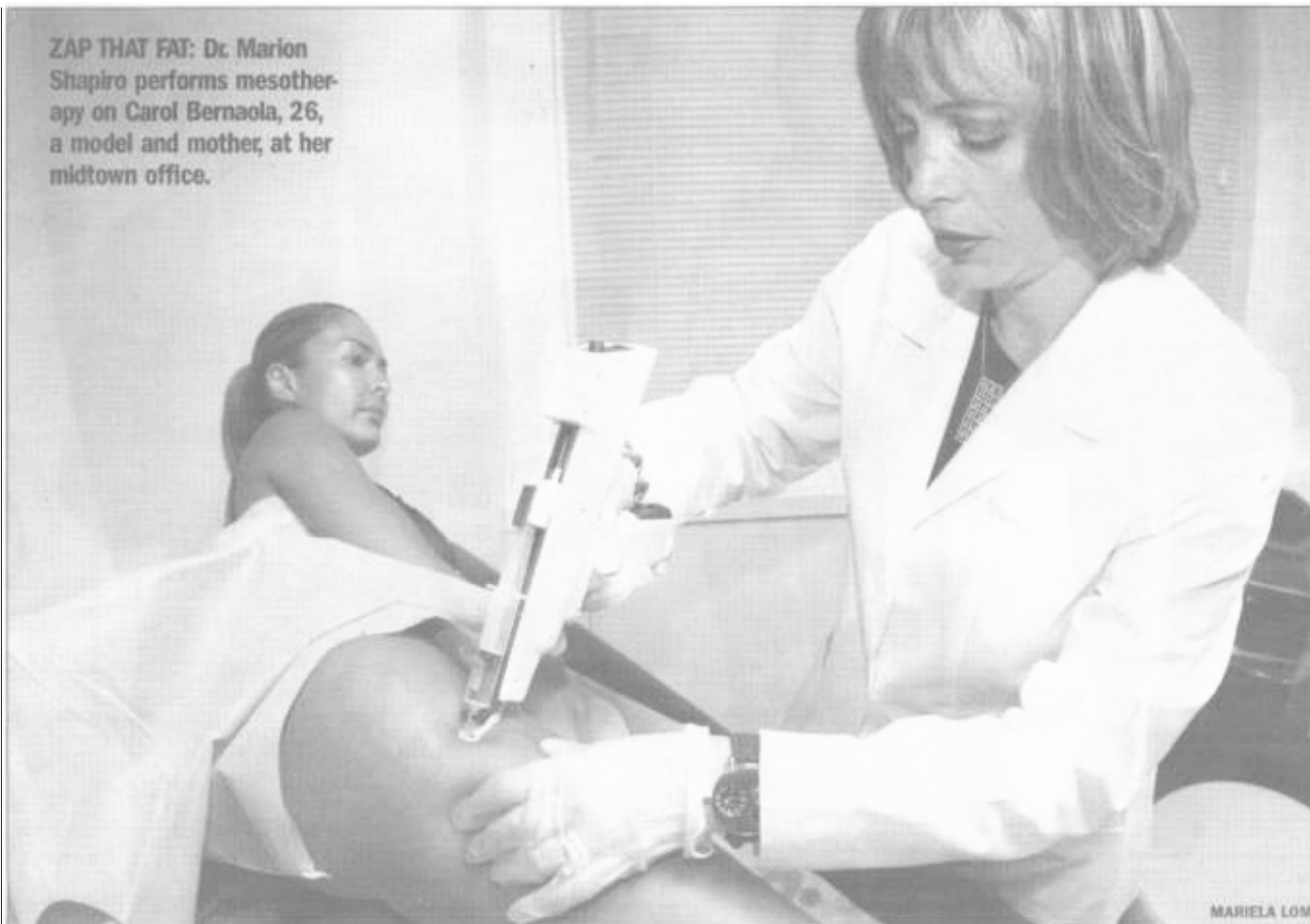
Fran Pelts, a 50-year-old psychotherapist who lives in New York, has lost a total of 16 inches in her hips, waist, arms and stomach. "These were areas I couldn't lose with a trainer or from exercising. It's expensive, but I've spent more money on junk food, on diets and on clothing than I have for this treatment."

UNEXPECTED EFFECT

Mesotherapy (the name refers to the mesoderm, or middle layer of skin) was devised in France in 1952 to treat rheumatism and sports injuries. The main ingredient, the asthma drug aminophylline, reduces water retention and swelling.

Doctors have found that when mixed with vitamins and plant extracts, aminophylline creates a permanent, nonabrasive solution that attacks fat trapped underneath the skin. Through a series of tiny and almost painless (skin-numbing novocaine is part of the formula) single injections with a mesotherapy gun, a patient can receive up to 150 shots in one area that will smooth skin and dissipate cellulite.

The price and number of visits varies depending on the specialist you choose. Mesotherapy can cost between \$1,000 and \$6,000, and two to 10 sessions are required. (Liposuction is generally more expensive, costing between \$3,000 and \$12,000, depending on the area covered and whether



ZAP THAT FAT: Dr. Marion Shapiro performs mesotherapy on Carol Bernaola, 26, a model and mother, at her midtown office.



NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON'T: After 10 mesotherapy treatments, this patient of Shapiro's has a trimmer waistline and hips.

it's an out-patient procedure.)

"Unlike liposuction, there's no anesthesia, no restrictive garments and no downtime," says Shapiro.

In the past year and a half, Shapiro has treated more than 1,000 clients. "By the fourth week, many of my patients have lost 2 inches," she said. "After 10 sessions, 10 inches can disappear."

They can, however, return. "Fat can [come back] if you pack on 20 pounds

or more," Shapiro admits, "and often to the same areas." To prevent this from happening, she advises a diet and exercise program.

Everett Lautin is a doctor who specializes in medical esthetics and has performed mesotherapy on 40 clients in the last year and a half at Manhattan's Institute Beaute. Lautin warns, "This is not a weight-loss technique. It's a technique for locally reducing fat and cellulite."

EXCEPTIONAL CASES

Mesotherapy is not for everyone. Shapiro does not advise it for patients more than 50 pounds overweight. She will not give the injections to patients who are under 18, are insulin-dependent diabetics or have severe heart disease or cancer. Also banned are people on blood thinners or medication for heart arrhythmia.

The technique does not work on about 5% of her patients. Shapiro can usually tell by about the fourth session if the shots are effective.

In addition, patients who prefer procedures that are FDA-approved might not want to risk mesotherapy.

"The problem with [it] is that we don't know the exact ingredients and concentrations doctors are using," says Dr. Howard Sobel, a dermatologic surgeon at Lenox Hill Hospital. "No studies have been done to prove its effects. Plus, we don't know if it's breaking up the fat evenly. Liposuction took 20 years to perfect."

Dr. Richard Swift, a New York-based liposuction and cosmetic-surgery specialist, adds: "People like the idea that it's not a procedure and there's no surgery. You lie down, get the injections and go home."

"But patients don't want to be guinea pigs. Any new technique needs to be carefully evaluated."