



Lotions Do Little to Combat Cellulite

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As if its very existence weren't bad enough, cellulite has all the aesthetic appeal of a mound of cottage cheese. The not-so-adorable dimples are far more likely to afflict women—of all shapes, ages, and fitness levels—than men. The look of orange peel can show up in the arms but never below the knees, and it is most prevalent in the buttocks and thighs.

The cosmetics industry has bounced back with a massive array of creams that allegedly mask the appearance of the dreaded undulations, and there's no shortage of herbal concoctions and spa treatments purporting to do the same. None of these methods is cheap, and their value drops significantly when you consider that—sales pitches and high hopes to the contrary—they don't actually work. David Zloty, a practising dermatologist and a clinical assistant professor at UBC, said that many patients come to him with the belief that more dramatic procedures will slurp their little depressions away.

"A lot of people think liposuction will get rid of cellulite," Zloty said on the line from his Vancouver office, which specializes in liposuction. "It won't. It may improve it slightly but it won't cure it."

Media messages are largely to blame for people's obsession with the skin's appearance. Zloty referred to tabloid magazines with headings like "cellulite spot of the week." These have pictures of stick-thin female celebs with their legs crossed; the compression of the skin gives it a ripply appearance.

Unlike the aforementioned articles, what can be taken seriously is that few women are immune. "Most women have it to some degree; it's not a sign of being overweight," Zloty said. "The theory that they have to lose weight is not the case and can be dangerous to their health. Even very thin, fit women will have it. For some women, it can be quite distressing; some are in great physical shape. They're bombarded in the media with images of teens and women in their early 20s whose images have been professionally touched up."

As many as 90 percent of women have cellulite, according to an article written by Pennsylvania biomedical consultant Peter Pugliese in the January 2000 issue of *Skin Inc.*, the spa-industry magazine.

Nobody really understands what cellulite is. One theory has it that connective tissue, in the form of "support" cables, runs beneath the surface of the skin. These cables are fewer and thinner in women's bodies than in men's, and they sit perpendicular to the skin (the male version runs obliquely); consequently, there's nothing to hold back protrusions of fat, which are normally not so close to the surface. Researchers are also looking at cellulite's connection with estrogen.

Creams and gels are the most common anticellulite weapons. They contain ingredients like xanthines (said, but not proven, to stimulate fat metabolism), retinoids (vitamin-A derivatives used to treat wrinkles), and alphahydroxy acids, which act as exfoliators (but that also haven't been proven to treat cellulite). The makers of these lotions don't boast that their products will eliminate cellulite but that they'll reduce its appearance.



Lotions Do Little to Combat Cellulite, continued

“The first thing is to be realistic,” Zloty explained. “Creams are minimally effective, not curative.... In fact, the benefit may come from the act of rubbing the cream in itself; the massage may make the skin swell up, thereby masking the dimpling.

“I don’t mind if my patients use them, but the change is probably going to be minimal,” he reiterated. “They are supposed to use it twice a day for two to three months. On a busy routine, they’re literally a pain in the butt.”

You can also expect minimal changes with herbal products like horse chestnut or essential oils infused with such ingredients as fennel, juniper, and thyme, Zloty said.

Another, more bizarre approach is a mechanical massage, which involves a motorized set of rollers and a low-pressure vacuum. Supposedly, the process enhances cellular function. Pugliese doesn’t buy it.

“I believe that the action of these mechanical devices can actually make the condition worse by inflicting further damage on an already weakened support structure,” he wrote in *Skin Inc.*

Some people rely on a more basic, hands-on massage to combat cellulite. Proponents of lymphatic drainage say massage will break down fat and move toxins out of the body.

Zloty disagrees. “Lymphatic-drainage massage feels good, but it probably won’t do anything,” he said.

A few local spas offer cellulite treatments, but in contrast to Internet sites that promise miracles, they’re upfront about the results. In other words, they don’t tell clients to pick up a thong for the next trip to Kits Beach.

At Beverly’s the Spa on 4th (2185 West 4th Avenue), clients can go for thalassotherapy wraps, which use sea mud and algae—rich in minerals—to rejuvenate the body. A treatment for the stomach, hips, thighs, and arms involves exfoliation and two wraps to reduce cellulite (\$95 for 60 minutes).

Beverly’s co-owner, Anne Lauener, explains that following thalassotherapy, people feel relaxed and their skin looks smoother. “The skin looks a little bit firmer, less dimply,” Lauener said in a phone interview. “But is the cellulite still there? You bet. They [women] can be in amazing shape, yet they’re disappointed because it’s still there. To feel better, get up and get moving.”

The Spa at Fitness World in North Vancouver (1989 Marine Drive) also has a cellulite wrap (\$95 for 75 minutes), which aims to restructure “damaged fibres to restore a smooth appearance to the body.”

“Some people believe it, some people don’t,” manager Alicia Wojcieszek said in a phone interview. “I’ve seen big improvements in some and not much improvement in others,” she said, adding that lifestyle comes into play.

Zloty agreed that healthy habits—including a “nice workout routine that’s not obsessive”—are crucial, while the preoccupation with cellulite is not.

Taking care of yourself does wonders for the body and the soul. Now if only tabloids would tout the beauty of a clear mind over a clear rear.