

Think liposuction is a way to get thin quick? Kara Jesella discovers that plastic surgery is risky business. Photographed by Ilan Rubin.

extreme measures



i think it's horrible," says twenty-year old Paula.* She's talking about *Are You Hot? The Search for America's Sexiest People*, ABC's reality-TV show that features three pseudo-celebrity judges telling skinny girls in string bikinis they need to lose ten pounds, while an audience of rowdy boys cheers on some clearly surgeon sculpted bodies. "These people are just throwing themselves at the mercy of judges. Who's to say who is the best looking?" Paula asks. But her concern isn't reserved for the unfortunate contestants, who often break down in tears when they're told, "You are not hot enough to continue." She's also worried about the effect the show has on viewers. "You're sitting at home watching, and you feel fine, then you realize that, according to these people, you don't look okay." She sighs. "Everyone knows society has an idealized image of how women are supposed to look. You want to be your own person, but it's hard when everyone looks the same ►

way." Compared with the girls on TV, Paula thinks she's "not obese, but a little bit overweight. I've tried dieting, and it's hard," she says. "I come home at night, and I'm tired. Some people have the drive, the willpower to get up and go work out, but I'm not one of those people."

So Paula has been thinking about getting liposuction. Gretchen, eighteen, has also been considering the procedure.

Though she was skinny just a summer ago, the normally size 2 college freshman has gained a few pounds this year, "just being in school and being with a group of people I've never met before. It's overwhelming. I exercise, but to what point?" she asks. "It's so frustrating that you kind of

give up. It's a cycle. You lose weight and look really thin.

Then you wait for the rebound period. If you don't gain it all back, you still gain some of it back.

Then people say, 'Oh, you look so healthy.'

But I don't take that as a compliment."

Paula and Gretchen aren't alone. Despite its price tag (\$2,000-\$10,000), liposuction is the number-one aesthetic surgical procedure in the U.S.; 3,811 liposuctions were performed on girls under the age of eighteen in 2002, according to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS). The number of women in their early 20s who undergo the operation is steadily increasing.

"Girls complain that when they go shopping

they can't wear what's out there because the tops fit one way and the skirts fit another," says Helen Colen, M.D., a plastic surgeon in New York City. But liposuction shouldn't be an alternative to getting a good tailor. "This is not buying a dress," says Colen. "This is surgery."

It sure is. During liposuction, which is performed, preferably, by a dermatologist or

plastic surgeon, fat is literally vacuumed from under the skin, usually from the abdomen, buttocks, or thighs. The operation can take place at a doctor's office or in a hospital. Some doctors, like Howard Sobel, M.D., a Manhattan-based cosmetic dermatologic surgeon, prefer that the patient be awake during the procedure, and use only local anesthesia. Sobel marks his patient's target spots

with indelible ink while she's standing up. ("Your body looks different when you're lying clown—you have no belly or saddlebags," he explains.)

She then lies down and he injects anesthetic into the body parts to be worked on, makes some incisions, and inserts a thin metal tube, called a cannula, poking it underneath the skin. The cannula is connected to a vacuum pressure unit, and the device sucks out the fat. After suctioning, he says, "I have the patient stand up, I mark her again, then lay her back down." This is repeated several times. Many plastic surgeons prefer to use light sedation or

"This is not buying a dress. This is surgery"

most-requested bodies



PUBLIC FIGURES ACCORDING TO A RECENT SURVEY, PLASTIC SURGERY PATIENTS COVET THE PHYSIQUES OF BRITNEY SPEARS, ANGELINA JOLIE, AND JENNIFER LOPEZ.

general anesthesia and have the patient lie down the entire time, which may be preferable for those with weak stomachs (and which some plastic surgeons feel is safer). With that method, however, "there is no way for the patient and doctor to work together to decide on the final result, so the doctor could take out too much or not enough," says Sobel. Occasionally a patient will faint at the sight of herself, and the doctor won't be able to finish the procedure—which means she'll have to come back for another round.

Uhe aftermath is equally daunting. "There's some swelling," warns Robert Guida, M.D., a plastic surgeon in New York City. Many patients spend the first day or so looking the same size as they did before. "After the operation, they need to wear a girdle-like compression garment steadily for about a week, and as much as they can tolerate for three weeks or so, especially at night," says

Guida. "The first day or two, the fluid from the anesthetic solution will drain out through the incisions." There will be significant bruising, which often lasts one to three weeks. Many patients experience numbness in some areas, which takes a few weeks to subside. "You can start exercising lightly in about three weeks, but you probably won't be able to go back to your normal routine until after eight weeks," says Guida. (www.DrGuida.com)

That's right: You'll still have to exercise. "Some patients assume they can now eat all they want because liposuction is there to take care of them," says Peter Fodor, M.D., a plastic surgeon in Los Angeles. Not true. If you start overeating or get pregnant, you will still gain weight—just not in the area where you had liposuction. The weight that normally would have shown up in your so-called "problem areas" will now be distributed to other parts of your body. And that's another issue entirely.

**Names have been changed.*

WARNING

dangerous curves

IF YOU'RE CURIOUS ABOUT LIPOSUCTION, HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER:

IT'S SAFER TO WAIT.

In most cases, doctors will perform liposuction only on women over the age of 21.

IT ISN'T A SUBSTITUTE FOR EXERCISE AND EATING RIGHT

"I don't believe in doing liposuction as a method of weight reduction," says Patricia Wexler, M.D., a Manhattan-based dermatologist who maintains that the procedure is for body contouring, not weight loss.

IT WON'T FIX YOUR PROBLEMS.

"If you think you can change your life by having liposuction, you'll be unhappy with the results," says Robert Guida, M.D., who notes the best candidates for the procedure want minimal changes to their shape. If you're focusing unhappiness about your life onto one part of your body, you may want to consider counseling—not surgery.

IT WON'T KEEP YOUR BODY FROM CHANGING.

"As teenage girls develop and head into adulthood, their fat patterns will change," says Arthur Handal, M.D., a plastic surgeon in Boca Raton, Florida. That means you can often get the body you want through the normal process of aging. You should also be aware that you'll still gain weight over the years and that your body will change naturally as a result of pregnancy.

IT ISN'T REVERSIBLE

But trends in body shapes are—they come and go, depending on fashion, the season, even where you live. Ten years ago, the waif look was in; then J.Lo came along and sparked a bootylicious trend for butt implants. You may eventually consider your so-called "problem areas" assets.

IT NEEDS TO BE DONE BY A QUALIFIED DOCTOR

Anyone with a medical license can legally perform plastic surgery. Even dentists and gynecologists have been known to make a living off liposuction—often with disastrous results for the patient.

IT HAS SERIOUS RISK FACTORS.

"There are basic risks to any procedure: infection, bleeding, scarring," says Lyle Leipziger, M.D., a plastic surgeon in Great Neck, NY. "If your skin is not elastic enough where there is already cellulite, additional rippling could occur." Undertrained surgeons sometimes make the mistake of removing too much fat, which can cause serious deformity, requiring grafting of fat from other areas of the body to correct. "Liposuction may be life-threatening if too much fat or fluid is removed from the abdomen," says Guida. "Deaths have been associated with the procedure."