"Cure" for cellulite? [1]

Dear Alice,

My sister has cellulite, especially in her legs. She went to one of these health clubs to look for a treatment and they put her on something like "lymphatic draining," and gave her some type of algae (Asiatic star or something like that), which is in a spray form that she has to apply to her legs once a week, and in pills once a day. The lymphatic draining worked as follows: they put a gel on her legs and then they covered them with a pair of "air trousers" which was inflating and deflating periodically, like massaging her legs.

Do you have any idea what this is about? Do these treatments really work? I mean, do they eliminate the fat accumulated on local spots, or do they merely "redistribute" it? Where can I read about treatments for cellulite -- not those in popular magazines, but something more scientific? Thank you.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Pick up a fashion or health magazine and chances are you'll see an article or advertisement about miracle cures for that pesky or stubborn cellulite. Although cellulite is often characterized as unwanted or unsightly, it's actually extremely common in adolescent and adult women. It's also good to know that it isn't considered a serious condition. The term cellulite refers to a dimpling effect of fat, which is caused by the way fat cells lie in or between connective tissue in the body, primarily in the hips-thighs-buttocks region. Several treatments and creams claim to erase or diminish the appearance of cellulite, including the one you describe, by promoting drainage of fluids and altering the architectural framework of the skin. And, while there might be a number of these products and services on the market, there's a lack of scientific evidence to support their effectiveness.
Before diving into the treatments for cellulite, here’s a bit more information to get you up to speed on the condition: Fat cells, especially when they get bigger, "push up" against the connective tissue that extends from the skin to the muscle below. This creates the uneven surface or dimpling that your sister has attempted to treat. Cellulite tends to run in families and may be caused by genetics and is impacted by certain factors such as advanced age, weight gain, an inactive lifestyle, and pregnancy. You may also find it interesting that cellulite may be more of a culturally aesthetic fixation than a serious medical condition (though the verdict’s still out), so treatment isn’t necessarily required.

Because cellulite is often considered undesirable, there are a multitude of creams and treatments that claim to get rid of it. Studies have found that commercial anti-cellulite creams are not very effective and if they are successful in treating cellulite, it’s likely only a short-term fix. The treatment your sister tried, known as manual lymphatic draining (MLD), uses gentle maneuvers to drain fluid in the spaces within the layers of skin, thereby pushing those fluids toward the bloodstream. The thought behind the technique is that cellulite is made worse by the excess fluid among the skin and connective tissue. While the treatment is available, what’s the science have to say? One study followed 20 women with cellulite on their upper thighs and buttocks as they underwent MLD. The study found that the massage techniques used in MLD are safe, but they are not effective enough on their own to successfully treat cellulite.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of scientific studies examining cellulite treatments, and, at this time, none have proven to be totally effective. But, not all hope is lost! The Mayo Clinic suggests that regular physical activity and a balanced diet may be among the best strategies to address this unwanted dimpling as it may enhance weight loss and minimize (though not totally eliminate) the appearance of cellulite. As an added bonus, many folks will who adopt these healthy behaviors in pursuit of minimizing cellulite stand to reap other benefits as well! To learn more about those benefits, take a look at the related Q&As and the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity archives.

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