

In Depth: HEALTH • TRAVEL

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Can Radio-Wave Devices Shrink Your Cellulite?

Just in time for summer, spas and physician offices are pitching radio-frequency treatments to reduce cellulite. A hand-held probe is held over the skin to deliver electromagnetic radio waves, which heat up fat tissue. Companies who sell the equipment say the procedure can reduce the appearance of dimpled fat and even slightly shrink thighs, hips and belly. Published data are limited, but some physicians say the treatments produce a noticeable—though temporary—effect on many patients.

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Cellulite, which affects more than 85% of women, is a result of natural fat distribution most likely caused by hormones, says Mathew M. Avram, director of Massachusetts General Hospital's Dermatology, Laser & Cosmetic Center in Boston. Though cellulite is normal, many people are desperate to get rid of it, spawning an industry, which has ranged from creams to suction machines.

Some published and unpublished data suggest the radio-frequency energy devices are effective. But Dr. Avram says, "The improvement tends to be modest and temporary."

Others are even more skeptical. "I don't feel it's been studied well enough, and scientifically it doesn't make a lot of sense to me," says Lisa Donofrio, associate clinical professor of dermatology at the Yale School of Medicine.

But Manhattan dermatologist Lori Brightman, who has tested a number of the devices, says she is impressed, despite initial skepticism. In unpublished data, she has found that VelaShape—a device sold by Israel's Syneron Medical Ltd.—reduces belly circumference by an average of 2.5 centimeters and thighs by 2 centimeters.

Treatments are expensive and generally not covered by insurance. Syneron, which has a U.S. unit in Irvine, Calif., recommends VelaShape be used weekly for a month to six weeks. Sessions take 20 minutes to two hours or more for multiple areas, and cost \$350 to \$850 for each area treated.



Tim Tooley

Thermage Inc., of Hayward, Calif., which sells a rival device, says only one treatment is needed to see results—but the heat of the procedure is painful and can take two hours for a single area; the cost generally ranges from \$2,500 to \$4,000. Physicians who do the procedures say results can last six months or longer, depending on the person and the device used.

Patients may see temporary redness and swelling of the skin, or mild bruising. Most of the treatments are painless—involving a sensation of warmth. The Thermage treatment involves a hot pulse deep under the skin that can be painful, so doctors often administer pain medications.

How the devices are supposed to work isn't fully understood. Thermage says the heat given off by its device tightens collagen fibers under the skin, and stimulates new collagen growth. When the skin becomes tighter, cellulite dimples become less visible, says Stacy J. Davies, a Maple Valley, Wash., physician who is paid by Thermage to educate doctors about the procedure.

Syneron says VelaShape "enhances" fat metabolism, but so far the company doesn't have scientific proof. VelaShape uses a combination of radio-frequency energy, infrared light, suction and massage. Syneron says the results are temporary because metabolized fat is eventually replaced by the body.

Physicians say the devices work best in patients who are normal weight, or only about 20% overweight, and who live a healthy lifestyle. People with extensive fat dimpling and significant loose skin aren't good candidates.