

# Not All Body Contouring Treatments Are the Same! Pros Break Down CoolSculpting and Laser Liposuction

BY AMBER KALLOR • JANUARY 17, 2019

## Laser Lipo

**How It Works:** Laser liposuction — available from brands like SmartLipo® — is an outpatient procedure. It involves creating a small puncture in the skin and using a catheter with a laser at the end to liquify fat and “break up scar and fibrous tissue,” says Dr. Melissa Doft, a board-certified plastic surgeon based in New York City and Clinical Assistant Professor of Surgery at Weill Cornell Medical College. Next, a cannula (i.e., a small and hollow stainless steel tube) is inserted to suck out subcutaneous fat from the body using a vacuum pump.

The advantage of using laser light in conjunction with traditional liposuction is that it “tightens overlying skin” by stimulating collagen production, she added. Some physicians opt to leave the puncture sites open, while others (like Dr. Lorenc), use absorbable sutures underneath the skin to decrease the chances of infection. It is important to remember that laser liposuction is “*not* a method to lose weight,” says Dr. Lorenc. “It is a procedure that can be used to contour correct the body.”

**Who It's For:** “Good candidates are healthy patients who are at or close to their baseline weights,” says Dr. Doft. “The best patients are those committed to a healthy lifestyle and who exercise.” Another important factor, adds Dr. Lorenc, is skin elasticity. “The better the elasticity of the skin, the better the result,” he says. “A patient with a lot of excess skin may have some skin retraction but may be better off with a tummy tuck or arm lift,” explains Dr. Doft.

**What to Expect:** “Laser liposuction can be performed in the office under local anesthesia or in the operating room under general anesthesia,” explains Dr. Doft. While the surface area and volume of fat being removed all play a role in determining a physician’s approach, Dr. Lorenc tends to treat smaller areas like the upper arms, medial thighs, or tummy under local anesthesia. This often involves prescribing a small dose of a mildly sedating medication such as diazepam to “take the edge off” and injecting the treatment site with numbing medication. “I can have a conversation about politics with a patient [during the procedure] but they don’t feel anything I’m doing,” he explains.

Some patients may feel “some pressure” under local anesthesia, says Dr. Lorenc, but it is a relatively painless process that lasts a few hours or less. For larger spots such as the thighs, hips, and abdomen, he often opts for twilight anesthesia (i.e., the patient is sedated but not unconscious). Any laser lipo procedure that involves taking more than 500cc of fat should *not* be done under local, notes Dr. Lorenc, and any procedure that involves taking over five liters should be done in a hospital so that a patient can be admitted overnight if necessary.

**The Post-Treatment Protocol:** After the procedure, patients wear a compression garment to minimize bruising, swelling, and possibility of seroma (i.e., a collection of fluid) for at least four to six weeks. After 48 hours, a patient can shower and put the compression garment back on. “I often advise patients to have a post-liposuction massage,” says Dr. Doft. She recommends seeing a massage therapist who specializes in lymphatic drainage. As for any discomfort, Dr. Lorenc shares that his patients routinely describe “feeling like they’ve worked out every day for a week.”

Swelling typically starts to subside after two weeks and bruising lasts anywhere from two to four weeks, depending on the extent of treatment. Patients are encouraged to start with low-impact exercise (stationary bike, elliptical, treadmill, etc.) one week after the procedure. “After two to three weeks, patients can do anything and everything,” he says. Dr. Doft says you can typically expect to be out of work three days to one week following the procedure, but individual recovery times vary.

**The Results:** “Unlike CoolSculpting, which kills some cells that are later absorbed [and flushed out] by the body, the liposuction cannula removes fat cells at the time of the surgery,” says Dr. Doft. Once those cells are removed, they can no longer expand or shrink. “Most patients tend to have one or two problem spots,” she notes. “Once the cells are removed from these areas, they gain and lose weight more evenly throughout their body.”

There is a little risk of noticeable scarring, but the punctures are small (approximately two millimeters in diameter) and are strategically placed in areas that can’t be seen, explained Dr. Lorenc. Follow-up visits generally occur within the first week following the procedure, and again at the four-week and three-month marks. There is some variability, but final results are usually seen after approximately six months, said Dr. Lorenc.

**The Risks:** “It is possible to burn the skin or damage the nerves in the area with heat,” warns Dr. Doft. Additionally, infection, hematoma, seroma, and scarring can happen, but all are very rare, says Dr. Lorenc. “The beauty of many lasers is that they provide feedback, so the doctor is aware of the exact temperature at all times,” he adds.

**The Number Sessions Needed:** While there is always the possibility of a second surgery, laser liposuction is a “one-and-done” procedure for the vast majority of patients, says Dr. Lorenc.

**What It Costs:** “As is the case with many things, the cost can vary greatly, depending on where you live and the size of the area being treated. Dr. Doft also points out that if you require the use of an operating room and anesthesiologist, that will bump up the price. For example, performing laser liposuction under the chin in Dr. Doft’s office hovers around \$3,600, whereas a few hours of liposuction in an operating room under anesthesia will set you back closer to \$10,000. For Dr. Lorenc, the base price for laser lipo is “in the neighborhood of \$7,500 to \$9,500,” but there could be “peripheral costs” related to the facility and anesthesia.

**Pro Tips:** “Many doctors and surgeons perform liposuction, but only a plastic surgeon does liposuction training during their residency,” explains Dr. Doft. “Remember that this is a real surgery, and thus you should have a surgeon performing it.” In addition to looking for a board-certified plastic surgeon with an accredited facility who is aligned with your aesthetic vision, it is important to ask what type of equipment is being used.