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Liposuction: A source for breast augmentation?

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By Anthony J. Brown, MD

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Worried about what to do with fat you've had liposuctioned from pudgy areas? Researchers have turned it into stem cells in the lab, but here's a more immediate use: Fat liposuctioned from other parts of the body can safely be used to increase a woman's breast size, according to study findings presented this week at the Plastic Surgery 2009 meeting in Seattle.

Many surgeons are already "using liposuctioned fat to reconstruct breasts after mastectomy," Dr. Luis Zapiach, a plastic surgeon in Hackensack, New Jersey not affiliated with the study, told Reuters Health.

However, injecting fat into the "breast for cosmetic purposes has been a controversial issue ever since the American Society of Plastic Surgeons banned the procedure in 1987," Dr. Roger K. Khouri, a plastic surgeon in Key Biscayne, Florida, who performed the current study, told Reuters Health.

"The procedure had the reputation of being ineffective, unreliable and potentially dangerous," Khouri said, and at present is not permitted outside of clinical studies.

With reconstructions following breast cancer surgery, Zapiach explained, all of the breast tissue is removed before the fat is injected, so there is no danger that fat - which excretes estrogen, a hormone that stimulates breast cell growth - will bring the cancer back.

With cosmetic augmentations, the tissue still remains, so "there is a theoretical risk that use of fat for augmentations could increase the risk of breast cancer," Zapiach said.

In the current study, however, which was small, there was no evidence to support concerns that the transferred fat may increase the risk of breast cancer.

The current study featured 50 women who had their liposuctioned fat used for breast augmentation. X-rays were used to look for dead tissue and breast cancer 3 to 12 months after the operation.

A key component of the operation, according to Khouri, was the use of a bra-like device he invented called the Brava. The device includes a small battery-operated pump that creates suction on the breast. That, in turn, increases volume and promotes the growth of blood vessels in the area. The device was worn for 4 weeks before the operation and for a few weeks afterward.

Women saw a moderate increase in breast size at 6 to 12 months - on average, about 210 milliliters, which could represent a variety of cup sizes depending on a woman's body type. Over a period of 3 years, breast size fluctuated with weight. All of the subjects were "pleased" with their cosmetic outcomes, the Khouri reported.

Tests indicated that, on average, 18 percent of the transferred fat in each patient died or "did not take." Zapiach said that this rate is "very low" considering that prior studies have shown rates between 30 and 70 percent.

There was an infection following the procedure in one of the 50 women.

According to Zapiach, Brava was initially introduced as a non-surgical means of increasing breast size. He added that while Khouri has had good success with Brava, many surgeons testing fat for augmentations do not use the device.

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Zapiach said that the new findings are encouraging, but that he believes the American Society of Plastic Surgeons - while not speaking for the group -- is likely to wait for results from a number of similar studies currently underway before reconsidering their position on the procedure.

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