



## Treating the Stomach

### Practitioners discuss key considerations when using energy-based devices to treat the abdominal area

**In recent years, it is safe to say that energy-led treatments, including laser, radiofrequency, ultrasound or cryolipolysis, have significantly increased and therefore influenced treatment offerings in a practitioner's clinic.** We know that the global medical aesthetic devices market is developing and is expected to reach an estimated value of \$11.20 billion by 2021! "I hate my flabby belly" is a statement likely to be heard on a day-to-day basis by many aesthetic practitioners specialising in body contouring treatments and a quick Google Trends search shows that 'how to lose belly fat fast' was in the top 10 most frequently asked questions on the search engine last year.<sup>2</sup> So, in an evolving specialty, how do you decide which energy-based device you should be introducing into your practice for abdominal treatments? What type of patients are most suitable for the treatment? And is there ever a one-size fits-all approach for this area? *Aesthetics* speaks to four practitioners for their recommendations.

#### Aims of energy-based stomach treatments

The aims of non-surgical treatment to the stomach is firstly to remove fat, and secondly to tighten the skin. Aesthetic practitioners Dr Rita Rakus, founder of the Dr Rita Rakus Clinic, and Dr Martyn King, founder of the Cosmedic Skin Clinic, agree that those offering treatments must be realistic with the quality of results they can expect to achieve non-surgically. For example, they say that if the patient has an overhanging 'apron' of skin and tissue, they would be more suitable for an abdominoplasty as opposed to any non-surgical treatments. Dr Rakus explains, "We have to analyse how much fat and loose skin there is; sometimes energy-based devices aren't suitable for the type of treatment needed and we need to be honest with the patient if we don't think they will get the results they want." She adds, "These devices are particularly good at sculpting the abdominal area and working to target those really stubborn areas of fat that patients just can't shift, like on the midriff." Aesthetic practitioner Dr Rekha Tailor, founder of Health & Aesthetics, echoes this and states that she often has patients with fairly athletic body-types seeking treatment as they just can't 'budge the bulge'. She says, "These treatments are useful

for all kinds of patients, even those who are athletic can benefit, as they still sometimes have the occasional pocket of fat in the lower abdominal area."

Another benefit of non-surgical treatment is the ability to improve the tone and texture of the stomach, which surgeon and founder of S-Thetics Miss Sherina Balaratnam says is a major concern for patients. As such she stresses the importance of identifying the patient's main concern – considering skin tone, texture, shape and laxity – before choosing a suitable treatment approach that will address them successfully.

#### Choosing technologies

With so many technologies available, how do you know what to choose? Dr Tailor suggests that practitioners start off by offering two types of energy-based treatment, one that breaks down fat cells and one that tightens the skin, as these are the two most common issues that patients present with. "I use two devices in my practice, the Accent Prime, that combines ultrasound and radiofrequency for skin tightening, and CoolSculpting, a cryolipolysis device," she adds. Dr King, who uses the ultrasound cavitation, cryolipolysis and radiofrequency 3D-lipo device, as well as cryolipolysis device, Cristal, highlights that many devices incorporate more than one treatment, "If you look at cryolipolysis, there is evidence that it will remove around 20% of the fat but it will also cause some skin tightening. Treatments such as simultaneous cavitation and radiofrequency will cause some skin tightening as well as fat reduction. So, for those looking to introduce just one device, there are many out there that incorporate more than one technology."<sup>3</sup>

Miss Balaratnam echoes this, "One of the devices I use, SculpSure, delivers fat reduction but at the same time we see an improvement in skin tightening due to the secondary benefit of some of the heat within the dermal layer." She also uses radiofrequency device, EndyMed for skin tightening benefits. "I think the most important thing is to look for a device that is FDA-approved, has a high safety profile and is supported by peer-reviewed clinical data. Multiplatform technologies can be a big advantage as you can treat multiple indications using the same technology." Dr Rakus adds, "I have eight energy-based devices that treat the stomach, all of which are good for treating a variety of areas. I don't believe that there is one machine that can tackle absolutely everything, so I like having the options." She continues, "For example, if a patient comes to me with a stubborn roll of lower abdominal fat that won't respond readily to diet or exercise, I will offer a treatment using the Cristal ICE device that uses cryolipolysis, whereas if a patient presents with loose skin but no fat issue, I would introduce ULTRACel which uses high intensity focused ultrasound and radiofrequency."

Dr Rakus notes that it is also worth 'keeping your ear to the ground' and keeping up to date on the latest product launches at UK conferences and overseas, as well as watching what has been trending on social media. She acknowledges, "One of my patients actually saw that CoolSculpting had launched in America and then told me about it when she came in for a treatment! Patients are now very savvy – with the internet, social media and celebrity endorsement it's not uncommon for patients to know about the latest technology before we do." As technologies are continuously evolving in the aesthetics arena, Miss Balaratnam and Dr Rakus both agree that it is important for practitioners to stay updated and be open to trying new advancements to improve their results. For example, they have both started using a new device that uses high intensity focused electromagnetic waves to help simultaneously build muscle and

burn fat, called EMSculpt. "With EMSculpt, the high intensity focused electromagnetic (HIFEM) technology penetrates through the skin and fat to target the muscle and cause supramaximal contraction. So far, all patients that I have treated at the clinic have reported how toned, tight and firm they feel in both the buttock and abdominal areas, and have noticed an increase in their body confidence," explains Miss Balaratnam.

## Suitable patients

First of all, it is wise to find out why your patients are requesting treatment to the stomach area, Dr Rakus notes, "People often want these treatments from a fashion perspective. They want to be able to fit into their wedding dress or look great on the beach in a bikini." Miss Balaratnam adds, "People want to show off their stomachs; we live in a culture now where women don't want to resign themselves to losing their femininity, especially after having children. Body contouring treatments can help to give these women back their confidence." All practitioners agree that it is important to make patients aware that the results won't be instant, a factor that Dr Tailor has found to be a common misconception, "My main concern is that patients want a quick result, but they need to be aware that treatment is going to take around three to six months. If they are planning on going on holiday for example, they need to plan ahead."

When considering suitability for non-surgical stomach treatments, Dr Tailor adds, "The ideal patient should be within two or three stone of their ideal weight and have stubborn fat pockets. They should also be mentally stable with no signs of body dysmorphic disorder. But, it's important to note that this isn't a weight loss treatment, it's a body sculpting treatment. If the patient overeats and doesn't exercise, then the results will not be maintained."

As per all treatments, practitioners should also seek a full medical history from patients. Miss Balaratnam finds it particularly useful when treating mothers, to get information on their pregnancy and childbirth. "Ask about the weight of their babies, the number of pregnancies and whether this was via natural delivery or caesarean section. This will give an idea of the degree of loss of skin elasticity, the presence of hernias as well as divarication of the rectus abdominis muscle so that you can determine which of the technologies is best suited to the patient," she says.

Miss Balaratnam also suggests assessing lifestyle choices, including alcohol consumption. She says, "I will advise patients to preferably give up alcohol all together. This clears the lymphatic system which is essential during the process of fat metabolism where the broken-down fat is naturally eliminated via the body. If our lymphatic system is congested, this will not happen as readily. A congested system just won't give you the result. Simple."<sup>4</sup>

Dr Rekha Tailor adds, "As with all procedures, you must always offer a cooling-off period for patients to go away and think about it. As well as being good practice, set out by the General Medical Council, a cooling-off period allows patients time to consider the advantages, disadvantages and costs. It's important that the patients have no regrets later on, which could potentially lead to complaints." In regards to maintaining patient results, Miss Balaratnam suggests asking the patient to provide a percentage figure of the level of improvement they are expecting to see "By doing this, it gives you an idea of what they feel they should achieve with a non-surgical technology."

## Treatment approach

Once a suitable patient has been selected and the main areas of concern have been identified, the next step is to perform the

## Copycat and counterfeit machines

Copycat machines, commonly known for copying the technology of others, and counterfeit machines, which are designed to deceive the purchaser by copying the branding of an original machine, are a key concern for Dr Tailor. She explains that practitioners should be wary of machines that have not been subject to efficacious clinical trials, "I think the big issue the industry faces is the selling and marketing of machines that come into the UK market from the Far East, for example. Often, they have not undergone relevant trials regarding safety and efficacy. In the US, there are stringent FDA regulations which must be complied with before any machine is launched, however this is not the case in the UK. There have been anecdotal cases with counterfeit CoolSculpting machines for example, where they have been known to cause third degree burns for not effectively monitoring skin temperature."

Dr King also recognises that this is a problem and says that patients often fall for the cheaper deals and wonder why the treatment doesn't work so well, "Good treatments cost money and a lot of people are price driven. If they see a cheaper machine on the market, they will usually go for that even though they may not be as safe or effective."

However, Dr Rakus says that copycat machines aren't always a bad thing, providing they aren't an exact copy and haven't breached copyright regulations, as well as having proof of safety and efficacy, such as participation in multiple clinical trials with suitable parameters. She says, "Take your mobile phone as an example and see what has happened to it in three years – it has probably updated significantly. It's the same with energy-based machines and sometimes independent companies are quicker at making these updates than some of the bigger, well-known companies. I've got nothing against them and I am always keeping my eye out for the latest ones, provided that it is technically superior and safe."

treatment. Dr King explains that as the stomach has a bigger surface area, it can be easier to treat than other areas. He explains, "I think it is generally easier to treat the stomach because of the underlying structure; you have the skin, the subcutaneous fat then your muscle layer – it's all in one place. But you have to be very artistic with the way that you perform the treatment. You are sculpting a body and that is a form of art." Dr Tailor adds, "The good thing about energy-based devices is that they work. The bad thing is also that they work. If you do a bad job, it's going to show."

According to all practitioners interviewed, a successful approach is to 'treatment blend' as there is no one-size-fits all approach when treating the stomach. Miss Balaratnam explains, "We are not here to sell treatments, we are here to deliver great results. The chances are that whatever your patient's concerns are, it requires a multi-factorial approach."



Figure 1: Patient before and six weeks after treatment. Patient had a combination of six cryolipolysis and six cavitation treatments with vacuum rolling for lymphatic drainage. Photos courtesy of Dr Martyn King and the Cosmedic Clinic.



Figure 2: 52-year-old patient before and 12 weeks after using two sessions of SculpSure to the abdomen and flanks. Photos courtesy of Miss Sherina Balaratnam and S-Thetics.

The patients won't be aware of this; they just pinch their belly and say 'what are you going to do about it?'. She continues, "As a well-educated practitioner, you know that there is probably going to be skin laxity and the patient is going to want to remove some fat, this is why it is so important to introduce treatment blending. For example, I have just treated a patient who has had four children. I have performed two treatments of SculpSure followed by six treatments of Endymed radiofrequency. After six weeks the results are looking extremely positive; I am encouraging her to wait for the whole three months' before comparing before and after photographs so we can see two things; the fat loss as well as the collagen contraction." Dr Rakus suggests that practitioners look at the bigger picture, "You have to make the patient look good. You can't just say, 'Well there is a section here in the middle, let's just freeze that', then you'd have flanks sticking out or a lots of cellulite under the ribs. I would always advise treating the flanks, even if the patient is only concerned with the lower abdomen, because once you have treated that area, they will only notice the untreated flanks." Dr King, who also runs the Aesthetics Complications Expert (ACE) Group, notes it is very important to consider complications as although, in his experience when the correct machine is used in the correct hands complications are uncommon, they can happen. He advises, "You should not be performing more than one cavitation or cryolipolysis treatment a week per patient as you are causing the fat cells to leak and are releasing fatty acids into the body. Although there is no clear evidence, common sense dictates that increasing fatty acids within the circulation by too great a level could risk harm to the cardiovascular system." He adds, "Cavitation and radiofrequency generate heat and there is the potential to cause burns, there have also been cases where patients have ended up with a frost burn following cryolipolysis. I would advise checking in with a complications group should you have any queries on this."

## Results and post procedure

Dr King explains that looking to the scales isn't always the best way to monitor treatment results. He says, "I always do patients' biometrics, we use the Tanita scales, so we not only measure weight, we measure circumference, body fat, water and composition." He continues, "It can be disheartening for patients to look at scales alone, as it is common for patients to see an increase in muscle mass when exercising, so naturally the weight won't be coming down. When looking at the biometrics as a whole, however, you may notice that their fat concentration has come down, so you can see progress." To optimise results, he also strongly advises lymphatic massage

post procedure. "I often finish my radiofrequency and cavitation treatments with lymphatic massage and have a qualified therapist on site who specialises in that area. Lymphatic massage encourages the drainage of the fat that has been liquefied," Dr King says.<sup>5</sup> Miss Balaratnam adds that in her experience dry body brushing following a procedure can also help to break down fatty tissue and improve vascular blood circulation, "I think that self-massage is key as it breaks down fatty tissue and puts it into the lymphatic circulation." Once the patient has undergone treatment, Dr Rakus also believes in offering them

professional nutritional advice to help with their diet, "I'm not going to have a patient spend a significant amount of money on a treatment with me and then just send them away. There's no point if they come back to you in six months in tears saying that the treatment didn't work, probably because you didn't advise them on the right aftercare. I believe that 50% of my work is performing the treatment, the rest is looking after my patient's health. To help with this I have weight loss programmes and nutritionists available on site." Miss Balaratnam expands on this point by emphasising the importance of follow-up consultations to analyse how the patient is reacting to treatment, stating, "If you don't have your reviews at set times then it's hard to then track the patient's progress. We book patients in for their complimentary follow up right at the start of when they agree upon a treatment plan because it's important that the patient sees the result. As practitioners, we can learn from these results and educate ourselves further."

## A look to the future

All practitioners interviewed agree that the body contouring market is set to continue to grow significantly and treatments to the stomach require planning, strong knowledge of the concern presented and a specific treatment programme, which will nearly always be multi-factorial. With advancements developing in the industry and the rise in patient awareness, Dr King states, "Over time, technology, safety and results get better and the complication rate goes down. As the technology changes, the treatments become more affordable and so the market gets more competitive; these are well-established treatments and ones that are only going to become more popular in time." Miss Balaratnam concludes, "The best part is being able to showcase results. These treatments consist of very exciting technologies, so we will do whatever works best in order to show them off!"

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