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The Wonders of Fat

By Scott J. Engel, MD

As we turn the page on another year, many people resolve to drop the pounds piled on during the holidays through diet and exercise. But did you ever think that the unsightly fat around the love handles or saddlebags could actually be useful?

Over the past decade or so, we have developed a new understanding of the aging process. I often use the comparison of a grape becoming a raisin. Not only does skin become thin, loose and saggy, but we also lose volume. This occurs in the face, breasts, hands, and even the buttocks. To restore a raisin to a grape, we would have to remove skin, plump it up, or do a combination of the two. Similarly, to naturally rejuvenate a patient, we can tighten skin, replace lost volume, or do both. What better way to restore that lost volume than with your own body fat?

Fat grafting has actually been around for decades. It is an extremely valuable tool that I use routinely in my practice. Since it is your own tissue, there is no rejection, which is why, unfortunately, you can't donate it to other people. There is usually an abundant amount. Additionally, fat tissue contains a vital component, stem cells. A significant amount of research is underway to investigate the effects of stem cells. In fact, this year, two scientists from England and Japan were awarded the Nobel Prize for their discoveries concerning stem cells. There has been new data showing areas treated with fat grafting to thicken skin, improve scars, and repair damage created by radiation. But for now, its use as a filler or volume enhancer has revolutionized the practice of cosmetic surgery.

Fat grafting is performed by gentle liposuction through small incisions. The fat is then prepared, transferred to small syringes, and carefully placed into the areas that need more volume. While not all of the fat makes the trip from one area of the body to another, the fat that does will live there forever. The benefits from stem cells are an added bonus.

As we lose volume in our faces, people tend to look sick and emaciated. To restore those chubby cheeks, and improve a shriveled mouth, and hollowed eyes, fat is precisely placed to give a soft, natural appearance.

Fat grafting to the breasts for cosmetic enlargement is currently being investigated and not generally accepted until further research is complete. However, in breast reconstruction fat grafting for contour deformities from lumpectomies or in mastectomies can significantly improve results.

The hands can often be a telltale sign of a person's age. With age, the hands appear skeletonized due to loss of volume, thinning skin, and visible tendons and veins. Adding volume to the hands restores the full look of a younger individual.

Many people are looking for the buttocks they never had, or to restore the sagging, flat buttocks that has occurred over time. To avoid the risks of buttock implants, including infection, extrusion, and pain, fat grafting is a powerful way to achieve a full round buttocks.

Remember, safety is the most important part of any cosmetic surgical procedure. It is imperative that patients research their surgeon. There are many physicians claiming "board certification". Be sure to see a surgeon certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery. ■