A patient's guide

Liposuction for the treatment of Lipoedema

Looking after you.
What is Lipoedema?

Lipoedema (riding breeches syndrome): a symmetrical accumulation of fatty tissue at the hips, upper thighs and upper arms (later also at the calves, lower arms and neck), that mainly affects women. The condition can be classified into the following three stages:

Stage 1: Fine-noduled skin surface (orange peel skin) and fatty swelling in the hip area.

Stage 2: Coarse-noduled, uneven skin surface with large depressions, also medically referred to as “mattress surface with large depressions, also medically referred to as “mattress phenomenon”.

Stage 3: Large, deformed skin flaps and lobules, with the tissue being firmer and harder.

Symptoms:

- Feeling of heaviness in the legs
- Swollen legs
- “Orange peel skin” and cellulite
- Increased incidence of bruising in the affected body parts
- Substantial pain in the legs; painful to touch
- Difficulties running
- Early onset of degenerative joint changes and arthritis.

What is Liposuction?

Liposuction is the most common procedure in plastic surgery and is mainly performed for cosmetic purposes. To a lesser extent it has been used for reconstructive surgery, for example, in the treatment of lipoedema (Brorson and Svensson, 1997a; Brorson et al, 1998) and lipoedema.

Liposuction for lipoedema and lipoedema involves the removal of fat beneath the skin of the affected limb. The procedure is most commonly carried out under a general anaesthetic. The surgeon makes several 5mm cuts in the skin of the affected limb and inserts a small metal tube through these cuts. The tube is then attached to a vacuum pump, which is moved around to break up and suck away the fat cells. This permanently removes the excess fat cells in that area.

What are the risks and side effects of surgery?

Having lipoedema/lipoedema surgery can be a very positive experience. Complications are infrequent and usually minor. However, no surgery is without risk and it is important that you are given a clear picture:

- **Scar** – scars are very small and hidden in a skin crease. They should be barely perceptible. However some people heal with thick scars and this can make them more noticeable.
- **Bruising and swelling** – this is very common and bruising may take a couple of weeks to settle.
- **Infection** is not common but may require a course of antibiotics. You will be given a course of antibiotics to cover you during the healing process
- **Contour irregularities** – it is possible to have indentations following this procedure. Massaging should resolve this but occasional further surgery may be required to correct this.
- **Exacerbation of lipoedema** – this is very unlikely but it is important to have a lipoedema nurse involved in patient assessment and post-operative management.

Further liposuction may be necessary to give the desired result. Only a certain amount of fat can be removed at one operation (approximately 5-7 litres). To take more than 5-7 litres of fat at one session can put you at risk of fluid shifts and blood loss. If you desire more liposuction then a second procedure gives the flexibility to add this.

Pre-op

- You will be seen in clinic to discuss the procedure with your consultant. All the risks will be discussed in detail at your consultation. Decisions about surgery should never be rushed.
- You will be required to see the lipoedema nurse specialist who will perform Limb Volume Measurements and go through post-operative care, exercise and advice.
- You will be measured for hosiery or surgical compression wraps (farrow-wrap/juxtapat which you will be required wear post-surgery. Hosiery will be included in the package price, however it can also be purchased direct from the hosiery company or you can get your GP or lipoedema clinic to prescribe (details will be provided, you will need two pairs).

It is important that you bring these garments with you.

Post-op

- Garments initially will be fitted in theatre so you will return to the ward in them.
- The limb will be elevated slightly.
- Garments will be removed after 24 hours, limb washed or you may have a shower, wounds checked and cleaned and then garments reapplied. You will go home in garments and be shown how to remove and apply these yourself.
- Your limb is likely to be very swollen, bruised and the tissues very sore and tender. It may take up to a month for all the bruising to disappear and the soreness to subside, and 6-12 weeks for the swelling to completely go.
- Garments should be worn for 24/7 for the first 7 days. Then day time only after that for up to 3 months.
- You may also need a stronger Class of garment if swelling persists in feet and ankles, this can be worn when you are able to tolerate.
- The most important time is during the first 3 months as garments may well require resizing as the limb reduces; therefore it may be beneficial to liaise with your local lymphoedema team or the lipoedema nurse with regards to on-going support.
- After 2 weeks you will be reviewed by your consultant and if necessary the lymphoedema nurse specialist.
- If you can start or have Manual/Medical Lymphatic Drainage post-op this will help with your recovery and maintenance. Private recognised MLD therapists can be found in your area by accessing the MLD UK web site or you can book with the hospital lymphoedema specialist.
- Expect some skin laxity but hopefully with the compression, skin will shrink back and if not you may have to discuss further surgery with your consultant.
- It is important that you start regular gentle exercise so that the joints do not stiffen too much. Within one to two days after surgery, all patients should be physically able to walk around inside the house and go for short walks around the neighbourhood. Remaining in bed and not walking increases the risk for blood clots in the legs and lungs. One of the reasons that excessive liposuction surgery on a single day is so dangerous, is that too much surgery may require propped bed rest, which increases the risk of fatal blood clots in the lungs. Most patients can resume their routine exercising within a few days after liposuction. Initially, patients should not attempt too much exercise. It is recommended that patients start out by doing about 25% of their usual amount of exercise, and thereafter increase their daily exercise as tolerated.
- Feel free to email and send photos for advice.
Contact for advice:

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How to find us

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