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Grooming

How to Buy a Six Pack

The celebrity-favorite Emsculpt machine promises the equivalent of thousands of crunches, for thousands of dollars, in just 30 minutes. GQ grooming columnist Phillip Picardi tried it.

BY PHILLIP PICARDI
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In a cruel twist of fate, I was on a self-imposed quarantine well before pandemic stay-at-home orders were put in place. I started the year as a free agent, which is just a nice way of saying I was newly unemployed. Well before everyone else embarked on sourdough journeys, I had already eaten my way through multiple cookbooks and drank my way through dozens of bottles of wine. It was mid-February before I'd put on a pair of pants that had a button closure—and I immediately regretted it.

When I enlisted a personal trainer for help, he suggested a high-protein diet, ditching sweets, and forsaking alcohol altogether. I laughed in his face. Then, I called up every beauty publicist I knew and asked them all the same question: *What are my options here that don't invoke me changing anything about my lifestyle?* In other words: How can I get the abs without the mind-numbing hours of meal prep and working out?

One publicist friend sang the praises of a fairly new "wellness innovation" called EmSculpt, a machine that she swore could deliver the equivalent of 20,000 crunches in 30 minutes. The treatment was so good, she said, that Victoria's Secret runway models booked in for it just weeks before their big show. (May that horrifying spectacle rest in peace.)

I felt around my mid-section, and thought about the months of dieting, exercising, and intermittent fasting my trainer had proposed. If this was a shortcut to results, then I was ready to try it—even if it did sound way too good to be true. That's how I find myself shirtless and getting shocked by an electromagnetic paddle in Dr. David Colbert's prestigious medical spa, New York Dermatology Group, on Fifth Avenue in New York City.

Just moments before I was whisked into my "treatment room," the supermodel Carolyn Murphy walked by me and complimented my trousers. Amy Sedaris was checking out at the front desk, laughing with the receptionist. I wasn't so much starstruck by these encounters as I was reassured by them; Dr. Colbert has long been trusted by many of the most famous faces in the world, a merit he's earned not by performing plastic surgery on TikTok or by posting barely recognizable before and afters on Instagram. In fact, he's sort of famous for the opposite. When I first met him three years ago, it was for a Botox consultation. I'd grown weary of the "eleven" on my forehead and the beginning signs of crow's feet, I'd explained. I was all of 26. He sent me home without so much as a prescription for retinol, urging me "not to even think about injectables" until I was at least in my mid-30s.

So before I even arrived for my twice-weekly abdominal shocking, I implicitly trusted Dr. Colbert. The "em" in EmSculpt, he explained, is short for "electromagnetic." Basically, the machine works by placing a large, electromagnetic paddle on the top of your abdomen, which then sends pulses to the abdominals that make them contract. Theoretically, the energy that's applied to the skin goes directly into the muscle. The technician administering the treatment is able to monitor the pressure of the pulses depending on a patient's comfort level. Some people (like me) howl in pain periodically throughout the process while others (like the classically trained male ballet dancers looking to tighten up before a big performance) read a book or scroll through their cell phones while the shocks do their thing.

The benefit of EmSculpt is that it is able to push your body to limits you probably would never get to in a single workout—all while you're lying down. "If you exercise too much, you get cramps and you have to stop—that's due to a lactic acid buildup," Dr. Colbert says. "But the EmSculpt breaks up lactic acid in the muscle so you recover a lot faster." Hence, 20,000 crunches—all with minimal discomfort. After my first session, I felt about as sore as if I'd done a core finisher in a HIIT class, but really no worse than that. I was able to run three miles the morning after with absolutely no aching.

Med spas and dermatologist offices typically sell treatments in "packages," where clients come in two to three times a week for 30-minute sessions over a span of two or three weeks. You should start to notice results at the end of your package, and they're theoretically supposed to get more noticeable in the weeks that follow. When I asked Dr. Colbert if it really was going to help me flatten my tummy, he assured me with his trademark honesty that there was a method to the madness: The majority of his clients who book in for one package, he says, tend to be repeat customers.

I'd come to learn that EmSculpt is practically fabled. Once I started talking about it to other friends in the industry, it seemed like I couldn't escape it. One fellow beauty editor told me she books in for a package before Halloween so she can feel more prepared for her scandalous costumes. Another told me it's rumored that Jennifer Lopez actually bought the machine to keep in her home. Just months after I finished my treatment package, Lisa Rinna was advertising the machine on *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*.

But, of course, there's a catch. As I was finishing my second round of EmSculpt, my technician wondered if I was considering any intervention for my "flanks." She placed her gloved hand on what I had previously called "love handles," and grabbed a sizable chunk of my skin. I had been under the impression that EmSculpt would help me burn fat on my stomach, but that wasn't exactly what the device was intended for. There's a difference between building muscle and burning fat, I was told. "This," she said, pinching my love handles again, "would be perfect for CoolSculpting. It melts the fat right off." Charming. Before I could ask how soon she could administer a treatment, the giant machine was being wheeled into the room.

CoolSculpting claims to freeze the fat cells beneath the skin, which causes them to break up and slowly die, thus getting deposited as waste. "Love handles especially can be exercise resistant," Dr. Colbert says, "so people generally target them for freezing, laser, or liposuction."

I watched as the technician firmly grabbed the skin on my hips and held it up to a very cold vacuum. In a matter of minutes, the entire area felt completely numb—kind of like your hands if you hold a snowball for too long. For days afterwards, the area retained its general numbness. I tried to imagine the fat melting away, but somehow, all these treatments were beginning to feel a little bit dubious.

To my genuine surprise, they weren't. At first, everything was so anticlimactic—unlike other treatments at the derm's office, there's really no instant benefit to EmSculpt or CoolSculpting. But eventually, Dr. Colbert's promise was fulfilled, even with very minor alterations to my day-to-day diet and exercise routine. Four weeks after I finished my two-week treatment plan, I noticed a visible difference in the mirror. There was much less to grab around my sides, and I even saw the very faint peek of abs when I flexed in the mirror. Two weeks after that, and the results were even more pronounced. I didn't just snap back—I actually looked better than before.

But the results weren't just pleasing for aesthetic reasons. One of the harder things about getting back into a workout routine—especially after being off the wagon for so long, like most of us are now—is how demoralizing it can feel to work incredibly hard for mixed (or, even adverse) results. That's sort of why I came to see EmSculpt and CoolSculpting not as a long-term solution or even something I'd regularly incorporate into my routine. Instead, it was more like a morale booster—a jump-start for getting my ass back in gear, and getting said ass off of the couch and to the gym. Why waste expensive results when I could just build off of them?

"I don't talk about the EmSculpt as a way to get a six pack," Dr. Colbert says. "Being obsessed with any body part like that is unhealthy psychologically." Rather, he points out, he uses the machine as an option for his clients who want to complement or supplement the work they're already doing to stay fit—whatever their own personal definition of "fit" is.

Either way, I was grateful to have had a real, bona-fide launching pad to feeling better about myself. But of course, right as I was getting into the swing of things—forcing myself out of the apartment, getting back to the gym, meeting up with friends for dinner rather than cooking for one—New York City issued its shelter-in-place orders. And then, just as New York started to re-open months later, my fiancé's job relocated us to California, which was well behind the Empire State in terms of its infection rates.

Once again, I found myself staring in the mirror (this time, in a new apartment), grabbing my "flanks" with a very familiar disdain. At this point, neither EmSculpt nor CoolSculpting were an option. Beyond the financial burden of the treatments (they each go for a couple of thousand dollars or more for a package), med-spas weren't yet open in California. It felt like a sign.

Defeated, I found my way to Diego Salinas, a world-class bodybuilding champion and strength coach based in LA. While we were limited in terms of how we could work together due to the pandemic, I did get the chance to explain my dilemma for him to offer some advice.

Salinas is not a lithe, fashion-adjacent New York City personal trainer. You will not find Barry's Bootcamp or Soulcycle on his résumé. He is not vegan. He laughed when I told him about how I was trying meditation. He actually looks like he could be the poster boy for Gold's Gym, or appear in a montage for Muscle Beach. (In fact, he won the Arnold Classic for his weight class in 2017.) Immediately, he started our dialogue with tough love. In Salinas' world, there are no shortcuts—there's just good old-fashioned hard work, mixed with smart and scientific approaches to achieving your personal goals.

"Poor nutrition mixed with inactivity can lead to a hormonal imbalance—likely low testosterone—especially if you're consuming alcohol chronically, which can lead to unwanted deposits of fat," Salinas told me. We all get deposits in different places, but the mid-section tends to be a pretty common area, particularly for men.

Instead of demanding an elimination diet or a punitive calorie goal—all things that have caused me to psychologically crash and burn in the past—Salinas gave me macronutrient goals, encouraging me to think smarter about my intake of lean protein, vegetables, and alcohol. He challenged me to cook all my meals from home for a full month, and taught me the difference between high glycemic and low glycemic carbohydrates (rice versus fruits, for example). I swapped the "I-swear-it'll-just-be-two-glasses" of wine dates for one glass of tequila on the rocks. I started to sleep better and wake up without feeling groggy. And, thanks to the gym being closed, I had to challenge myself to do workouts that would keep me mentally engaged—bike rides that turned into tours of different corners of Los Angeles, runs that helped me get more familiar with my neighborhood, sprints up the city's many, many steep hills.

I'd love to tell you that I'm back to where I was right after my EmSculpt treatments with Dr. Colbert, but I'm not—not yet, at least. (And maybe not ever!) The doctor's procedures made it a hell of a lot easier to hit a target goal, but it didn't change much in terms of my mindset. Rather, I think it perpetuated a harmful idea that's always nagged me in the back of my head: that I can achieve a certain body ideal quickly if only I'm willing to work hard enough (or pay enough money) for it. I've spent so much time chastising my body for coping with all I've thrown at it, that I've completely missed being grateful for having this big, healthy body in the first place.

There's a whole host of lessons I've learned from the good, hard work—eating cleaner, prioritizing a sleep schedule, and committing to an outdoor activity multiple times per week. But the best of these lessons was that our bodies change, and impatience or anger isn't actually going to get us anywhere.

Now, it is a little tempting to book in for an EmSculpt treatment and see what kinds of results I could expect with all these adjustments I've reluctantly made to my lifestyle. Maybe I could finally pay my way into getting the six-pack I've always dreamed of. But if I've learned anything, it's that fitness results—no matter how they're earned—are only temporary.