

New treatments for facial lipoatrophy

Dr. François Laplante

The sunken cheeks associated with lipoatrophy cause great distress for some. A number of reconstructive procedures have been shown to minimize the effect, and they're becoming available in Canada – at a cost.

Correcting lipoatrophy is possible, but for Canadians, getting access to the products with the best track records is still complicated and expensive. Realistic expectations and a doctor who can negotiate the system to keep your costs down will help. Several new injectable implants are providing very satisfactory results for those willing and able to take advantage of them.

A new permanent filler

Bio-Alcamid™ is a filler implant that is permanent and effective for the treatment of lipoatrophy. It comes as a transparent gel in ready-to-use sterile syringes. Treatments are spread out over a minimum of six weeks and, as a rule, between one and four treatments are necessary to achieve the desired effect. Side effects generally last between seven and 10 days after treatment, but can persist longer in some cases. Common side effects are sensitivity, redness, inflammation and bruising. There is also a risk of infection, so a preventive antibiotic is sometimes prescribed before starting treatment.

The treatment, which has for the past year been available through Health Canada's special access program, was approved in April 2006. The cost of treatment, including materials and physician's fee, varies from \$1800 to \$3500 according to the severity of the lipoatrophy. Because these are considered primarily cosmetic treatments (though this is debated by many), the cost is subject to PST and GST. However, in Québec and perhaps other provinces, the doctor offering the service can refer a patient to a psychiatrist who may decide that the treatment is medically necessary and therefore exempt from sales taxes.


A first visit to the doctor is needed to determine the number of sessions required to achieve the desired results. Antibiotics and painkillers may also be prescribed at this time. Each treatment lasts about 40 to 60 minutes: you'll be photographed, your skin will be disinfected, and you'll receive a local anesthetic before the injections. The next visit will be scheduled at least six weeks afterwards to give the product time to integrate into the texture of your skin.

Poly-L-lactic acid (PLA)

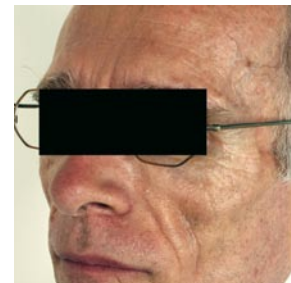
Poly-L-lactic acid (Sculptra™ in the US and elsewhere, New-fill™ in France) is a semi-permanent implant that works to correct lipoatrophy. It comes as a white powder that's diluted with sterile water and injected in small quantities (0.2 to 0.3 mL per injection) under the skin. The skin is then lightly massaged to distribute the product as evenly as possible. Treatment takes between 20 and 30 minutes. Over the three months following treatment, the PLA particles stimulate collagen production to replace lost fat. Between three and six treatments are generally needed, at two- to six-week intervals. Response depends on the number of treatments but also on the patient's age. The PLA particles dissolve naturally after 12 to 18 months. The collagen weakens with time and touch-ups may be necessary in up to 50% of people after about two years.

Side effects include swelling, redness and occasionally bruising that rarely last more than a day or two. Granuloma, when one or more nodules appear some months after treatment, occurs in between 1/1,000 to 1/10,000 of cases and is generally due to an overproduction of collagen around the PLA particles. Cortisone injections will most often take care of them, but if not, the nodules need to be surgically removed. PLA shouldn't be used on people with autoimmune or inflammatory diseases such as rosacea.

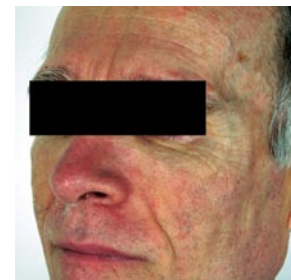
Despite the fact that PLA has been the most widely-used treatment for lipoatrophy since the first publications on it appeared in 2000, it hasn't yet been approved by Health Canada. Approval is likely by summer 2006. The cost per vial is \$425 in Canada and \$480 in the US. Costs per treatment in the US including the physician's fee are about \$1500. Other filling agents exist in Canada, including Artecoll™, Dermadeep™ and Radiesse™. There is only limited experience with the use of these products in lipoatrophy.

For more information about treatment for facial lipoatrophy, see www.faceforward.ca 

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Facial lipoatrophy before treatment



Following treatment

Bio-Alcamid before/after photos courtesy of Dr. Francis Beninger, plastic surgeon, Toronto.