

# Firm promise

Bored of home workouts? Not ready to give up chocolate cake? A taut tummy could still

be yours, if you splash out on hi-tech toning treatments

By Sasha SLATER

'The time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining,' as JFK once said. Well, we may have been plunged into a tsunami of misery and confusion over the past few months: 2020 has thrown a lot at all of us. But one positive thing it has done is to give most of us a little time and space to concentrate on ourselves – what with no socialising indoors or, indeed, out of doors. Of course, there's the dreaded 'Lockdown 10': the 10lb it was all too easy to gain during those early Zoom cocktail parties and competitive sourdough-baking sessions.

But while our social life is on ice, now is the time to build a better, brighter new self to emerge from the chrysalis of isolation when spring/the vaccine/herd immunity arrives.

So a washboard stomach is the aim for 2021. Particularly when you consider that the Cruise collections – whether midriff-baring at Chanel, or heavily corseted at Dior – focused a lot of attention on the waist. Speaking for myself, Yoga with Adriene and Joe Wicks workouts eventually palled. A friend who emerged svelte and toned from a painful divorce urged sit-ups on me and, when my overenthusiastic crunches gave me a sore spot on the coccyx, bought me an extra-thick yoga mat. But to no avail. Perhaps the marriage breakdown is a prerequisite? I needed a more hi-tech solution, and there are plenty out there.

The problems of tummies are threefold: slack skin and/or stretch marks; abdominal fat; teeny-tiny abs.

Let's take the last of those problems first. Obviously, my divorcée friend is right and you can really see results with exercise. But how much more beguiling is the offer from a contraption called a TruSculpt Flex? This is like a Slendertone on steroids, using EMS (electrical muscle stimulation) to tighten and strengthen muscles. The technique was developed to help people rebuild muscle after accidents or injury, and basically you're plugged into a machine with electric pads delivering shocks to your muscles as you lie there like Frankenstein's Monster waiting to be reanimated. Each 45-minute session adds up to the equivalent of 54,000 sit-ups, and you do four sessions within a 10-day period.

I tried this at Dr Preema Vig's clinic in central London. Jenna Cole, the senior aesthetician who was in charge of the operation, quietly turned up the dial while chatting to distract me – although there's a limit to how distracting chat can be when your stomach feels like it's being clutched and shaken in a giant pair of monster jaws. But my pain threshold is high, Cole tells me, and I took the

punishment. They say the results come through after six weeks or so, and continue to build, but I could tell a difference after only two sessions – with my lateral muscles definitely looking and feeling tighter (from £650 per session, or £2,200 for four, drpreema.com).

For those who want to contribute somewhat to their rapidly tightening abs, personal trainer Christina Howells has the solution. She uses a German-developed muscle-strengthening machine, created by Miha BodyTec, that is popular with athletes and bad-back sufferers. Hers is portable and just as strange as the TruSculpt. You wear a special T-shirt and pair of shorts to conduct the electrical stimulation better, and then it's the same drill, with electrical pads strapped to your body – all over the front, back, bottom, arms and thighs this time (£40-£90 per 20-minute session, thatgirllondon.com). You look like an extra in *The Matrix* but, says Howells, 'The beauty of EMS is it delivers an intense workout without putting any strain on the joints.' The

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other difference is that Howells takes you through a gentle workout as the machine does its clenching thing, so you're using the muscles yourself as well while the electric shocks are waking your body up. Again, the more pain you can take, the faster the results, although Howells is cautious – to prevent you going too far and potentially injuring yourself.

Surprisingly, despite their dramatic effects, neither of the two procedures leaves you aching and unable to move. If I'd actually done over 200,000 sit-ups in a week, I might be feeling it rather, but with these treatments you really don't. In fact, I feel much more strain from the ab workouts at my local (and excellent) Pilates centre, Pilates HQ, in London's Angel. Naturally, the more ab exercise you can do once your rectus abdominis is fired up, the better.

So that's the muscles sorted. Now for the fat...

Swerving chocolate, red wine and cheese is a good idea. But at the moment that triumvirate is what's keeping me going. So bearing that in mind, there are lots of alternative options for addressing the flab that's concealing those taut abs.

One is the Onda machine, wielded by Lenka Anthony, a clinical aesthetician, at Tempus clinic in Belgravia. This device has flat pads that heat up as Anthony rubs them over the offending part of the body. It uses waves of energy that pass through the skin to be absorbed by fat cells and heats them up to 55C, melting fat away in about 10 minutes (£400, tempusbelgravia.co.uk). Depending on the preferred setting, Anthony can focus on cellulite or deeper fat deposits. She says that a number of her clients are personal trainers who have little pockets of fat that no amount of exercise and protein shakes can shift. The area she treats feels hot while you're in the clinic, and you have to keep it away from sunlight or saunas for a while afterwards.

Back at Dr Preema Vig's clinic, there's an alternative in the shape of the Emsculpt, which combines muscle stimulation with fat-burning, and can reduce fat in the relevant area by around 19 per cent. Cole, too, sees professional athletes and models at the clinic for just a tiny tweak that will, they hope, spell physical perfection.

And finally there's that stretch-mark problem, and the associated issue of wobble. According to Hilary Mantel in *The Mirror & the Light*, Henry VIII's objection to Anne of Cleves is that she has slack skin on her belly. If she were around today, she would no doubt be going to one of London's many clinics offering microneedling and laser treatments, or PRP (platelet-rich plasma therapy) in which the patient's own blood products are reinjected into the area. This is what Dr Hiba Injibar of Dermalurge recommends (45 minutes, £650, dermalurge.co.uk). A less invasive alternative is a massage treatment like the Fit and Tone body programme offered by La Maison Valmont, which involves an hour's kneading and pressure to slim down the area (£160, whiteroombeauty.com).

Firming and toning creams that might do some good include Valmont's D Solution Booster serum (£209, harrods.com); Natura Bissé's Diamond Body Cream (£197, harrods.com); Dr Barbara Sturm's Anti-Aging Body Cream (from £25, drsturm.com); and Endor Technologies' Firming & Body Shaping Cream (£85, elenzia.com). Their results are gentler but the creams are a pleasure to use in themselves. As for the more invasive stretch-mark treatments, no matter what Henry VIII would have said, mine are the result of two pregnancies and two much-loved children: I may want toned muscles and a sleeker waist, but I'll carry the slack skin with pride. ●