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Body wraps are touted as the cure for everything from joint pain to fat thighs. Our reporter swaddles up to see if the treatment slims more than her wallet.

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BODY:

Reporter Stephanie Allmon is wrapped in Ace bandages that have been soaked in a mineral solution.

Teresa Flores measures one of Allmon's forearms before the treatment.

Teresa Flores measures reporter Stephanie Allmon before applying the "power wrap."

ILLUS.

I should have bought an expensive girdle, I thought. Forced myself to the gym three times a week. Counted my Weight Watchers points. Accurately.

Some people -- skinny people, no doubt -- say hindsight is 20/20. But when you're gazing at your 'hind in a fitting-room mirror, jumping up and down as you shimmy the zipper to the top of a too-tight bridesmaid dress a week before the wedding, you lose sight of all those sensible things you should have done months ago. You begin to accept that objects in three-way mirrors are exactly as large as they appear.

And you panic. And you pick up the phone, and you schedule a body wrap that "guarantees" you'll lose 10 to 30 inches in an hour.

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At least -- I did. Within 48 hours of booking an inch-loss "power wrap" at a Body Wraps of Texas shop in Fort Worth, I was wrapped from toenails to temples in warm, wet Ace bandages, covered with a poncho for warmth, with plastic bags catching cloudy fluid around my feet as I glided on a Gazelle exercise machine about as gracefully as the Michelin Man might. Except, I'm sure the Michelin Man can feel his right arm; mine was starting to go numb. I wondered if I might faint. I envisioned being rushed to the hospital, paramedics madly unswaddling me as they searched for a vein to start an IV.

But I called the "wrap tech" over, she loosened one of the bandages and I survived the Gazelle. Lost 10.3 inches, in fact (and also \$155). Dress fit well. The wedding was beautiful.

If this all sounds a little nuts to you, then you're probably thin, and confidently so. Congratulations, go eat leftovers.

But if you've ever banned carbs from your plate, sucked dinner through a straw or admit you'd have better luck finding "South Beach" on your bookshelf than on a map, you know the kind of allure that comes with a "guarantee" of inch loss or weight loss, or even the promise to correct cellulite or saggy skin.

You can't swing a credit card around a salon or spa these days without hitting someone who's being swaddled or smeared in a "body wrap" for just those purposes.

In fact, 90 percent of spas offer some kind of wrap; only facials and massages are more popular, says Susie Ellis, president of SpaFinder Inc., a global spa marketing, media and research company. A year ago, SpaFinder even pointed to "detoxing" -- which is what most body wraps claim to do -- as a top spa trend in 2007.

Before you schedule a body wrap to "detox out" that extra turkey you gobbled and stuffing you scarfed around the Thanksgiving table, here are answers to some questions that don't often get asked -- but should.

Are all body wraps kind of the same?

No; so-called "slimming" wraps are only one in a very, very long list of wraps. (Read about them at right.)

They're also offered for relief from aches and pains, to boost immunity, help diminish skin diseases such as eczema and psoriasis, and generally improve skin tone.

The substances used in treatments include almost any natural element you can think of -- herbs, seaweed, mud, food, minerals. And the processes differ, too: Some wraps involve lying down; others, exercising; others, sitting in a sauna. For some, you're wrapped in plastic, in others, bandages. Sometimes, "treatments" are painted onto your body.

What's the science behind them?

It depends on which kind you get and what they're supposed to do. Generally, they claim to "detoxify" the body or skin through an osmosislike process that "draws out" toxins. The body, practitioners say, has lots of toxins that build up (from food, caffeine, the environment, even stress). Extra toxins, they say, cause cellulite, excessive body fat and even illness.

Some wraps claim to "liquefy" and eliminate cellulite through the skin or waste, and some are said to stimulate the body's metabolic processes to encourage weight loss. Others simply claim to hydrate the skin.

Michelle Wilson, founder of Body Wraps of Texas, says Power Wraps for inch-loss purposes use bandages soaked in a highly concentrated solution of minerals and electrolytes in purified water. The solution soaks into skin and releases toxins, practitioners say.

So, do they serve a wellness or aesthetic purpose?

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Body wraps fall into a gray area between health and beauty. Some offer purely cosmetic results but explain those processes using biochemistry that may sound like medical speak to clients. Others promise medical results -- such as relief from arthritis. That's one of the most confusing things about wraps, Ellis of SpaFinder says.

"I liken it to the 'medical spa' area, in which there's a wellness aspect as well as an aesthetic aspect," she says. "You'll have some wraps ... that will be more wellness oriented. Clearly, slimming wraps are more aesthetic oriented."

A wrap that claims on a menu to be "anti-toxin" sounds both aesthetically and medically ambiguous to consumers, and spas don't always clarify what, exactly, they mean by the word, she says.

"What we say is that spas should be transparent about what they're offering," Ellis says. "There are things said on a lot of spa menus that are sort of misleading."

What do doctors think of wraps?

Again, it depends on whom you ask. No major studies by mainstream medical researchers have been done on body wraps. Dr. Joel Schlessinger, president of the American Society of Cosmetic Dermatology and Aesthetic Surgery, is an outspoken critic of body wraps that promote weight loss or cellulite reduction -- especially those that promise permanent results.

"While I think there is a place for them as a feel-good treatment in a massage or aesthetician-applied situation, the use of body wraps as weight loss is clearly more hocus-pocus than anything," says Schlessinger, a dermatologist and cosmetic surgeon and president of skin care company LovelySkin.com.

His biggest concerns for body-wrap clients, he says, are the risks of severe dehydration, overheating and circulation problems -- though he has never seen patients who've had medical complications during a body wrap.

Schlessinger, like many mainstream doctors, doesn't subscribe to the notion that the body needs to be detoxified, he says, because the liver and kidneys are always ridding the body of toxins.

"There's absolutely no data to say [wraps] help with cellulite or saggy skin," he says.

It isn't just traditional medical doctors who are skeptical. In the current issue of his *Essential Guide to Natural Healing*, natural-healing guru Dr. Andrew Weil writes in an article headlined "Detox Basics: Cleansing for Health," that he "hasn't seen any evidence that [body wraps] will melt away anything but your money." He also worries about the potential for dehydration and even anxiety attacks in people who are claustrophobic.

"My bottom line: Cellulite is not toxic and, unfortunately, can't be sucked out of the body with herbs or other substances," he says.

Do those who perform them need a special license?

Not one from the state of Texas, as cosmetologists and massage therapists do. According to the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation, body wraps are an unregulated service in Texas.

A special license is not needed for shops that offer body wraps, either. And this is troubling to Schlessinger.

"These are clearly not medically savvy facilities, and the people who are running them are at best a medical assistant and at worst the girl who was selling burgers at Burger King last week," Schlessinger says.

Typically, those who perform wraps at salons and spas are licensed massage therapists and have some training in wrap procedures, says Wilson of Body Wraps of Texas. To perform the kind of inch-loss mineral wraps done at her salon, she says, wrap techs must undergo two weeks of training in topics such as biochemistry of the product and the

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structure of the body, to earn a license from the national parent company, Suddenly Slender.

How much do they cost?

Ellis estimates that basic wraps at resorts and spas cost \$65 to \$75. However, more exotic wraps that use expensive products and add, say, a massage component, will go up from there. A quick check of Tarrant County spa menus shows a range from about \$65 to \$200. A Power Wrap at Body Wraps of Texas costs \$135.

Beware of those that try to sell you a "series" of wraps up front, Ellis says.

"Ideally, ask to speak with someone who's done them," she said. "A good spa could let you try one so you can make a good decision," she said.

Bottom line: Do wraps work?

Yes -- and no. Chances are, most people will experience a temporary result from a body wrap, and that's OK if a temporary result is expected, Ellis says.

"I liken it a little to going in and having a spray tan," she says. "It's not going to last, but that doesn't mean it wasn't fabulous for a few days. It's kind of cool if you're going to go on the beach for the first time in the summer, to do a wrap and have tightness in the skin, and it's often very motivating to people to start exercising and eating right."

But as with anything, beware of claims that sound fraudulent -- namely, that results will be permanent.

"Once you get away from the feel-good experience that helps you to nourish the skin and appropriately moisturize and hydrate the skin, the likelihood of the wrap changing your fat cells ... or any other process is essentially nil," Schlessinger said. "There's no substitute for a good diet, a healthy lifestyle and exercise."

PEEK UNDER THE WRAP

The three main procedures

Hot sheet: Sheets that have been soaked in the treatment product -- substances such as herbs, coffee, milk, honey, seaweed, or mud, dissolved in hot water -- are wrapped around the client.

Used for: detoxification, to stimulate metabolism as part of a weight-loss program, to decrease water retention or boost immunity

Cocoon: The treatment is applied directly to the client, who is then wrapped in plastic and a blanket.

Used for: detoxification and slimming treatments

Tension: These wraps are usually made of terry cloth strips soaked in a treatment (herbs, seaweed, etc.) or of heavy cellophane.

Used for: "Forcing" fluid out of a limb that's wrapped or compressing tissues so they appear slimmer. Also, detoxification.

10 TYPES AND THEIR CLAIMS

Coffee wrap: Firms tissue, decreases water retention, evens out skin's texture

Hot cider or juice wrap: Brightens and firms skin, stimulates circulation and lymph flow

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Sea clay wrap: Cleanses skin and fat cells of toxins, "shrinks" the body

Moroccan mud wrap: Heals eczema, psoriasis and skin sensitivity

Parafango (paraffin mud and fango seaweed) wrap: Decreases the appearance of cellulite, detoxifies and compresses fatty tissue; treats muscle soreness

Homeopathic-naturopathic wrap: Relieves pain; improves sleep, mental sharpness and vision; eases aches and pains; anti-aging

Power wrap: Reduces inches; tightens and firms skin

Protein wrap: Sloughs off pollutants from the skin; tones sluggish skin

Thalasso-therapy (sea water) wrap: Accelerates metabolism by boosting body's blood and lymph circulation

Desert heat wrap (using self-heating bubbly wrap rich in copper from Arizona): Revives and repairs skin; relieves joint pain

Source: SpaFinder industry research

BODY-WRAP HISTORY

Body wraps were used thousands of years ago by Chinese and Egyptians -- Cleopatra reportedly underwent them -- to detoxify the body, tighten and tone skin and stimulate the body to rid itself of excess fat and lymph fluids.

19th century: They were used in Europe by Austrian natural healer Vincent Prissnitz.

1940: The founder of Rancho la Puerta spa in Mexico, one of the first destination spa resorts, offered them to guests as a balm for aches and muscle discomfort.

1970s: Live demonstrations on *The Phil Donahue Show* caught the American public's attention.

1980s: First became widely used in salons

Source: SpaFinder industry research

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