

Lipo in

Cellulite is like the common cold—benign and unpleasant, unavoidable yet incurable. Do the latest creams finally offer the solution? By Cara Birnbaum

A year and a half ago, 32-year-old Marta Ramos read an article about a new cream that claimed to dissolve cellulite. "I think the words they used were 'eats fat'—and when you read something like that, you think, Oh, my God," says Ramos, who dashed out to buy two \$50 bottles of Shiseido's Body Creator. "I was skeptical but intrigued," says the high-school programs director. Within two weeks, she swears, her pants felt looser and her dimpled thighs looked smoother. When asked whether she knows how Body Creator works, she answers vaguely, "Not really—maybe caffeine or something?"

Ramos isn't the only one patting her thighs and scratching her head. For most women, peering intently into the bathroom mirror is the only way to determine how well a cellulite cream works. Companies make big promises that their products will "reduce the appearance of cellulite up to 60 to 80 percent," and their packages boast seductive phrases like "perfecting complex" and "slenderizing gel."

Yet studies backing up these claims are hard to track down—and companies treat the information like classified CIA documents.

Hope, of course, trumps skepticism all the time. And while fat in any form stirs a strong reaction, the puckered, dimpled kind inspires a particularly keen hatred because it's so persistent. Since cellulite is a vexing combination of bulging fat cells and weak connective tissue, diet, exercise,

and pricey in-office treatments usually do little to banish it.

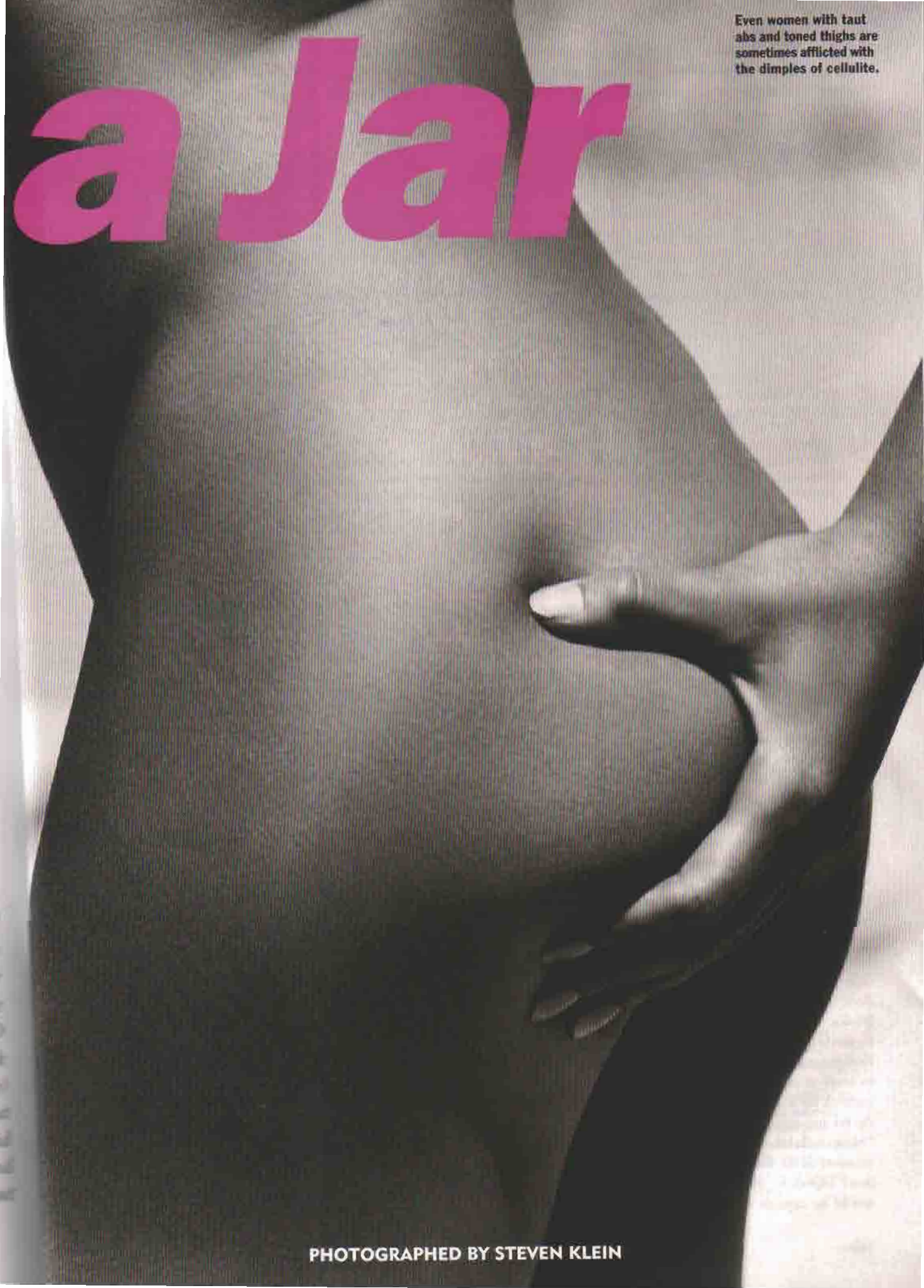
As a result, when a promising new cream claims to be a panacea, it's hard not to swap cynicism for blind trust. In the first nine months of 2003, firming and cellulite formulas saw the greatest dollar

One company took 2,000 orders for its cellulite cream before it even hit counters.

growth of all women's prestige skin-care products—62 percent, according to NPD Beauty Trends. Last year, Osmotics took 2,000 orders for Lipoduction (at \$175 a pop) before it even hit counters. Doctors bristle at these trends, calling for fewer claims and more proof. But armed with research and ingredient lists, it is possible to tease out the facts from the hocus-pocus.

Even women with taut
abs and toned thighs are
sometimes afflicted with
the dimples of cellulite.

a Jar



PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEVEN KLEIN

CAFFEINE BUZZ

Anyone willing to settle for fleeting results can grab virtually any tube of cellulite cream. Caffeine has been in most formulas for good reason: It has been proven to work by draining excess fluid from fat tissue. Caffeine "temporarily dehydrates fat cells, making them look smaller," says Leslie Baumann, dermatologist and director of the University of Miami Cosmetic Center. Certain marine extracts are thought to smooth the puckering in the same way. Carrageenan and alginic acid are two compounds that "can conceivably draw water into the skin, giving it the appearance of being more firm," says Howard Fein, a Palos Verdes, California, dermatologist. "[But] the effects, if they occur, last 24 hours or less."

FAT BURNERS

If shrinking fat temporarily sounds tempting, actually rubbing away unwanted inches for good is truly tantalizing. The latest ingredient to cause a frisson in the lab is forskolin, derived from a root used for centuries in Ayurvedic medicine to treat asthma and heart disease. Forskolin has been shown to trigger lipolysis in the laboratory, a process that causes fat cells to release their own fatty acids, which are safely expelled from the body, according to David Heber, director of the UCLA Center for Human Nutrition. In his studies, women who applied a lab-made forskolin cream to one thigh twice a day for two months lost up to two inches more than they did on the control thigh. "Forskolin is only one of several compounds that stimulates lipolysis when applied topically," Heber says. "Caffeine is another." Osmotics and Estée Lauder blend both forskolin and caffeine into their anti-cellulite potions.

Retinol has been shown to keep fat cells from maturing in laboratory tests done by Neutrogena. And conjugated linoleic acid speeds up lipolysis, according to studies by Estée Lauder on its Body Performance products. But doctors tend to scoff at the idea that *any* ingredient can sink far enough into the skin to affect the fat and connective bands underneath. "Since cellulite is mostly a structural problem of the tissue beneath the skin, I don't expect to see anything soon that would be capable of penetrating to the

depth of the problem—let alone have any effect," says Richard Glogau, clinical professor of dermatology at the University of California, San Francisco. But at least one company, Osmotics, claims to have broken that skin-penetration barrier. Its Lipoduction cream is the first formula with a delivery system, called ethosomes, similar to those in topical drugs, says Francine Porter, the company's president. The ethosomes encapsulate key ingredients like caffeine and forskolin, allowing them to penetrate the skin's surface more effectively than other cellulite creams, according to Osmotics research.

THIN SCENTS

Circumventing the skin-penetration issue entirely, several new creams instead focus on the sense of smell. These potions have a sharp, distinctive fragrance—and it's not meant to make your thighs smell pretty. Both Shiseido

Body Creator and Decléor Slimming Aroma Duo contain a blend of grapefruit, fennel, pepper, and tarragon oils, which is supposed to trip the sympathetic nerve. That nerve activates body's "fight or flight" response, mainly through the release of noradrenaline, a hormone that kicks the body's overall metabolism into high gear, according to Shiseido executive director of education Rochelle Quezada.

Tell this to a doctor, and you'll see his eyebrows shoot up. An aromatic compound can prompt the release of noradrenaline, says endocrinologist C. Wayne Callaway of George Washington University's medical school. But "the effect would only last a short while," says Charles Wysocki, a neuroscientist at Monell Chemical Senses Center. "Over time, the brain habituates to the odor and no longer reacts the same way."

SURFACE IMPROVEMENTS

If you can't beat it, camouflage it. Cellulite lurking beneath smooth, firm skin is less visible than dimples under a slack cover. "You could argue that anything that makes the skin more shiny and reflective reduces cellulite's appearance," says Eric Bernstein, a dermatologist in Marlton, New Jersey. This is why nearly every cellulite cream contains ingredients that tighten, moisturize, and attempt to thicken the top layers of the skin.

One of the most effective of these ingredients is retinol, which has been proven to boost collagen production, according to a scientist at Neutrogena. And L'Oréal's Par-Elastyl complex contains a protein that makes the skin firmer and more resilient, according to company scientists. But smoothing dimpled skin or temporarily shrinking fat is certainly less sexy than eliminating cellulite forever. Then again, hoping for anything more is a waste of energy, according to the experts. Some doctors attribute the popularity of these creams to a placebo effect. Indeed, the menthol, spearmint oil, and capsicum tincture that companies slip into their formulas "cause tingling, which makes you think the product is working," Baumann says. But until there's solid data, the formulas seem to be, at best, temporary, says UCLA's David Heber: "It's like Cinderella. You can apply them, but you'd better get home before midnight."

Smooth Operator

Many women will go to far greater lengths to fight cellulite than forking over \$175 for a cream.

But so far, even expensive treatments that require repeat visits to the doctor aren't a proven cure. One of the newest weapons in the battle of the bulge is Vela Smooth, which will be in clinical trials in eight doctor's offices this summer. It vigorously massages the skin with rollers to improve circulation and loosen the bands of connective tissue around fat deposits that cause dimpling. Vela Smooth also adds radio frequency plus infrared energy to the process—the heat makes fat pockets more malleable and receptive to the rolling, according to San Francisco plastic surgeon Michael Kulick, who is conducting the studies for FDA review. New York City dermatologist Neil Sadick says that the device may also improve lymphatic drainage, which is responsible for shuttling fluid and waste out of the body; less bulk in fatty tissues could mean less bulging between cellulite dimples. Although final results won't be available until later this year, initial studies done after eight sessions "look encouraging," Kulick says. "It may be more effective than any other treatments currently out there."