

HOT SHOT Revival of a crazy diet trend.

Despite calls that it's unsafe and unsustainable, the popularity of the injectable HCG diet continues to peak and trough. EUGENIE KELLY looks at why it won't go away ...

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MANY WOMEN WILL RELATE to 39-year-old Rachel's* morning ritual. Six am: wake; stretch; whip up a protein smoothie; coerce kids out of bed. But here it gets what some might perceive as hairy. At 6.30am, she quietly slips into her bathroom and injects herself in the stomach. No, she's not an ice addict or a diabetic. In fact, size-zero Rachel believes she is in her best shape ever. And she attributes it all to her prescription-only twice-daily HCG (human chorionic gonadotropin) injections — a hormone derived from the urine of pregnant women that allows her to exist on 500 calories a day.

The theory that HCG could help people lose weight — particularly from stubborn spots where abnormal fat deposits may sit, such as the belly and thighs — was pioneered by a British endocrinologist, Dr Albert T. W. Simeons, in the 1950s, with the treatment peaking in popularity in the '70s when clinics started popping up in Europe. Criticism from the medical fraternity that supposedly misunderstood the strict conditions it came with (more on that later) saw it being discredited, thus it waned in popularity.

Around 2010, in the US, sales of a homeopathic version (drops placed under the tongue; lozenges; and sprays) were newly rampant due to the explosion of Amazon and ebay. But once women realised the health implications of not having it professionally monitored, they turned to doctors whose clinics lent it an aura of respectability, some charging a whopping \$1300 a month at the time for the injections and dietary advice.

Now it seems to be back on the radar again. “I ran into a friend who is in her late thirties last Newyear's Eve and she looked dramatically thinner, but it wasn't just the weight loss,” Rachel says. “She looked younger, but her skin and hair looked amazing. She was really cagey about what she'd been doing, but I implored her to tell me. There's definitely a stigma to this. People are so judgmental.” (Hence Rachel insisted on a pseudonym for this story.)

The criticism isn't unfounded. HCG is a hormone, and when you manipulate your hormones in this way you become prone to headaches, blood clots and tender breasts — and these are just the minor side effects. “if there's any family history of breast or cervical cancer, or even cervical changes, I say flat-out no,” says aesthetic medicine specialist Dr Jeremy Cumpston of Sydney's Ageless Clinics, who estimates he has treated 100 patients in the past 15 years. that's not a big number, which is something he's proud of. “People are asking for it, but I'd only prescribe it to 20 per cent of patients at most. I have to be very familiar with a patient's history before I'd even consider it. And I only ever allow it be used over a 12-week period. You can't hormonally manipulate your body indefinitely. There will be consequences.”

Of the 80 per cent Dr Cumpston turns down, he guesses three-quarters of them would need to lose only three kilograms, tops. “They're being vain!” he huffs. “Regulate some self-control and eat properly! I'll only ever consider patients who need to lose 10 kilograms. If they're five kilos overweight and the extra heaviness is really affecting them and they're desperate, then maybe I'll consider prescribing it. They just need to get into a good space, and HCG can have an amazing motivating effect on their behaviour long-term.”

Aside from monitoring any potential red flags with blood tests, Dr Cumpston makes his patients follow strict guidelines, including keeping a food diary so he can ensure they're following a high-protein/low-carb Atkins-like calorie-restricted diet (the injections supposedly suppress appetite, resulting in weight loss of approximately 200–500 grams per day); and ditching their usual beauty

products, on the grounds that some can slow down weight loss due to the fats and chemicals in them. Coconut oil is the only fat patients are allowed to cook with, ditto for shampoo; Cetaphil must be used as a cleanser, and organic virgin coconut oil as a moisturiser.

One major enticement of HCG for many women is the promise that the diet will deliver them the body of their dreams, eradicating fat from stubborn spots such as the hips, thighs, upper arms and belly bulge. Dr Cumpston's not sold on this, but Rachel swears it's true. "If you're short like me, you can't fantasise about having Cindy Crawford's body circa 1992," she sighs. "This diet allows you to see your body at its best. And once you see those results you're so motivated to not become a fat cat again. Yes, I'm paranoid the weight will come back on when I'm finished. But I'm praying to the fat gods that it doesn't happen. This has given me a benchmark and shown me what my body can do. I don't stop getting compliments. It's insane."

Despite warnings about the health risks that come with this program, Rachel is happy she discovered it. "If I hadn't had my children yet, there's no way I would have done this," she stresses. "I went into this with an extensive knowledge of my health history and knew I was in the low-risk band. Yes, it's pure vanity, but I was informed and had read the research behind it."

Rachel is also vehemently opposed to the idea that HCG is a shortcut. "I see it more as a bypass," she says. "But we're living in this 'no pain, no gain' culture. People snigger about lap band surgery, and this is tarred with the same brush. There's more respect out there for self-deprivation. If I said I got this body by surviving on kale, running marathons on a treadmill and drinking charcoal water, everyone would be applauding me, saying, 'you go, girl!'"

Let's face it, HCG may come with a long list of side effects and an unsustainable diet that's not going to set you up for longterm healthy eating habits. But, as Dr Cumpston rightly points out, HCG highlights that medicine is a slow-moving beast and that treatments are often violently opposed and shut down without proper investigation. "Look at the food pyramid," he says. "for years we accepted that and now realise it was upside down. Doctors are a sceptical and cynical bunch. And that's a good thing. But far too often we say no without really looking and listening. we're ignoring the fact that some people get real results from HCG."

* Name has been changed. Always consult a qualified medical professional before beginning any nutritional program.

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