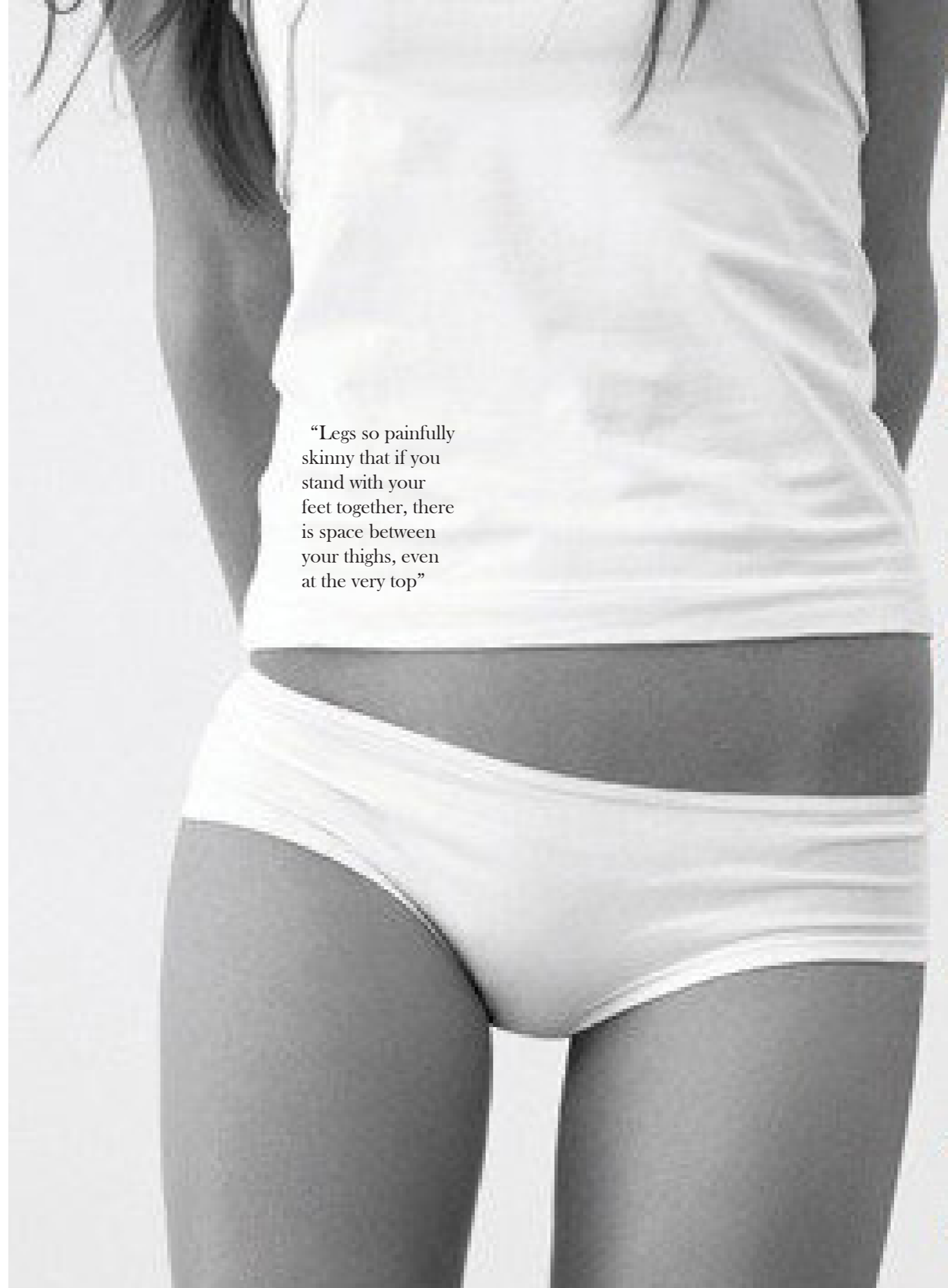


# Mind The Gap

More and more women are turning to extreme measures to get model proportions. Thigh-gap surgery is the latest beauty trend on the rise in the UK, but the quest for perfection has serious consequences. Yara Silva investigates.



“Legs so painfully skinny that if you stand with your feet together, there is space between your thighs, even at the very top”



**T**HE WAITING ROOM IS lined with pictures of the successful results of cosmetic surgery. Men and women smile down at me from every wall and tell me in big, bold, letters how much their lives and self-confidence have improved since undergoing surgery. There's a video on repeat telling me that I need to act immediately to retain my youthful looks.

I look around – there's a young woman sitting opposite me with a bandage on her nose. By her side, wearing a low-cut black top that displays her eerily rotund breasts, is another woman around the same age.

A woman (I'd guess in her fifties) walks into the room and calls my name. Her mouth is smiling but the rest of her face is static. Her large breasts look like they are trying to escape from their cashmere cardigan prison.

I've booked a consultation at a central London cosmetic surgery clinic to talk about having 'thigh-gap' surgery, otherwise known as liposuction on the inner-thighs to create legs so painfully skinny that if you stand with your feet together, there is space between your thighs, even at the very top. From summer 2012 to February 2013, the number of women opting for thigh-gap treatment increased by 240 per cent according to one Harley Street clinic, LoveLite. It's no coincidence that the treatment's peak popularity coincided with London Fashion Week – when models from all over the world became

front-page news and the UK was bombarded with images of beautiful women whose legs did not touch above the knee all the way up to the crotch.

Stella\*, the lady who summoned me, takes me into her office. Her job is to sell a beautiful body ideal to women and men who are unhappy with their natural physiques. I'm not unhappy with mine. I'm 22, 5ft2 and weigh 51kgs – but I don't have a thigh-gap. The elusive gap is not natural. In fact, according to Mary George, a spokesperson for eating disorder helpline Beat, it's a fad based on unrealistic images. "A lot of what we see with people with those sort of shapes are

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Photoshopped and it's not achievable in any healthy way", she says.

Liposuction works by inserting saline solution through a tube, into the thighs to separate the muscle from the fat. The tube then sucks out the saline and the excess fat cells. Final results are not seen immediately, and the patient has to wear something called a 'compression garment' - very unattractive, Christina Aguilera-esque, crotchless Spanx. These must be worn for two weeks, every day and night, removed only to shower, and after that for four weeks daily. Only then will the women be able to see the fruits of the surgeon's labour.

Regular check-ups at ten days after the surgery, six weeks after, three months and then yearly are necessary in order to make sure there is no haemorrhaging – although Stella assures me this is very unlikely. But, setting you back £2,670 for both legs, inner-thigh liposuction doesn't come cheap.

According to the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons (BAAPS),

there were 2,638 liposuction operations done on women in 2012 – a decrease of 14 per cent from the previous year. This doesn't mean that women are seeking less intervention. On the contrary, BAAPS President, Rajiv Grover, puts this drop down to an increasing number of women opting for fat transfers instead of fat removal (meaning that fat is taken from one area of the body through liposuction – in this case, the thighs, and transferred into another part of the body – often the buttocks). There were 2,641 fat transfer surgeries done in 2012, up 13 per cent from 2011. Or alternatively, women choose non-invasive procedures – up 240 per cent since summer 2012.

One non-invasive treatment is Lipoglaze, which has been endorsed by ex-WAG Lizzie Cundy and by Made in Chelsea's Binky Felstead. Yasmin Khostovan, a spokesperson for LoveLite, a clinic that offers the treatment, says: "Lipoglaze is perfectly designed for those who have those hard to shift stubborn areas, and no matter how hard they work out, they just can't seem to shift. It's like their get out of jail free card." However, not just anyone can undergo the procedure. Patients must be at least one stone over their ideal weight (worked out according to Body Mass Index – weight in kilograms divided by height in metres), in

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A heavily Photoshopped image of singer Beyonce



Victoria's Secret model Candice Swanepoel (not Photoshopped)

order to qualify for the treatment.

Lucy Robinson, a 28-year-old product manager for a children's clothing company from Bishop's Stortford, had the Lipoglaze treatment to create a thigh-gap in March 2013. She says: "I don't necessarily admire super skinny people. It's people who have a thigh gap but look a bit more healthy. Like Victoria's Secret models – I do think they look great but then they're underwear models so they probably need to look that way. My thighs were a troublesome area that I wanted to get rid of. I deliberately wanted to create a bit of a thigh-gap because I thought it looked nicer."

When I mention the Lipoglaze treatment to Stella, she shudders. "Don't do that, whatever you do. I have a high pain threshold and I was in agony" she says, absentmindedly lifting a manicured finger to her plum-purple tattooed, Botox-injected lips. "Of all the surgery I've had, I've never experienced pain like it."

Lucy also admits to the procedure being painful: "Obviously it hurts. It's basically a Hoover sucking at your legs." Lipoglaze is marketed as a pain-free, cheaper alternative to liposuction, at £1,000 for both legs, and the claimed potential risks are much lower than those of the invasive surgery option. I am told by Stella, that liposuction can leave you with scars, deep vein thrombosis and skin discoloration, whereas Lipoglaze can leave you with bruising for about six weeks following the procedure. It works by freezing the fat cells in the chosen area of your body. The cells break down and eventually pass out of your body when you go to the toilet. Neither procedure oozes glamour – they're a far cry from the glitz of Fashion Week. But do you need an expensive treatment if you want your legs to look as skinny as Cara Delevingne's?

Matt Field, a personal trainer from London has worked with Victoria's Secret models like Cara and says that even they – the supposed pinnacle of body perfection – "are all worried about getting flat, droopy 'cottage cheese' bums and crinkly dimply thighs." Field says: "For the past six months almost 90 per cent of my female clientele have visited me with the same request -legs that go all the way to the top without touching". Yet, even he admits that the desired look "is going to depend on individual genetics".

Stella tells me there is no point in referring me to a surgeon. They would

most likely tell me to go to the gym to tone up and surgery should be seen as a last resort. I'm both surprised and relieved. I went into the consultation thinking that Stella would heartlessly try to sell me whatever surgeries she could, and

she's turfed me out. I'm no closer to achieving a thigh-gap than I was before.

Struggling with what to do next to learn more about this trend, I hit the internet. Typing 'thigh-gap' into the search bar leads me to hundreds of

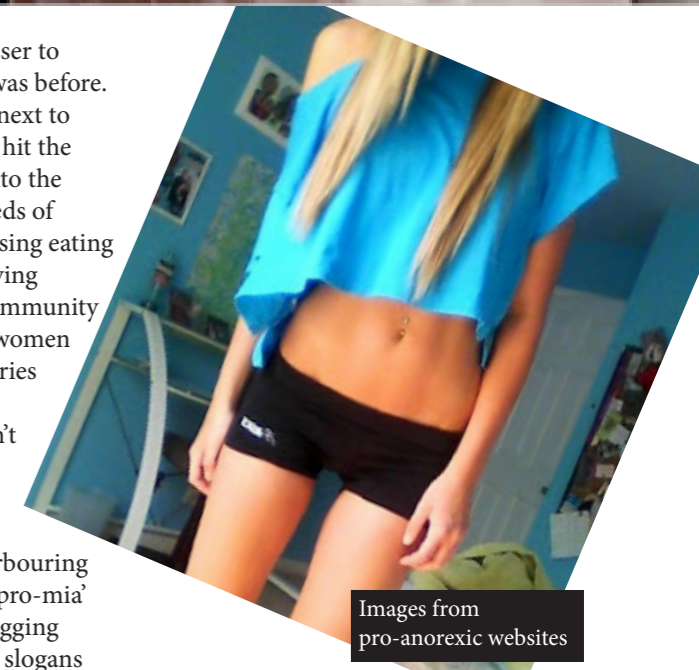
websites glamorising eating disorders and giving platforms to a community of pro-anorexic women to share their stories and encourage each other, because "eating isn't very Chanel", pop up through all social media platforms. Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, Blogspot and Flickr are all harbouring 'pro-ana' (pro-anorexia) and 'pro-mia' (pro-bulimia) communities, egging each other on with disturbing slogans

such as "when you're struggling, imagine your dream body", and Kate Moss's infamous quote "nothing tastes as good as skinny feels".

A report published in the European Eating Disorders Review found that women who had no previous body image issues and viewed pro-ana websites decreased in self-esteem, lowered their perceived attractiveness and began to believe they were overweight. These websites are so easily accessible that it's not surprising that a growing number of women are using them on a daily basis. I totally

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Lucy having the Lipoglaze treatment



Images from pro-anorexic websites



understand this now – I've been looking at pro-ana websites whilst researching thigh-gaps and I'm starting to feel more self-conscious. This morning I got up early and swam 50 lengths before 10am which I've never done before. Despite being aware that my genes dictate my body shape, I find myself wanting a thigh-gap more than ever.

Dr Lisa Orban, a psychologist from London who runs her own private clinic, says this is not uncommon. "Even though restrictive eating and over-exercising have clear deteriorative effects on health, often the individual strongly believes these sacrifices are worth it, in order to achieve what they perceive to be an ideal body. Given the large presence fashion and media have in today's society, it is not surprising that they tend to dictate current trends in body shape, and unfortunately at the moment, unnaturally thin is in."

Sioned Quirke, a specialist dietician based in South Wales and spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association says: "a lot of people are looking at the thigh-gap as the ultimate accomplishment in weight loss, but there are certain areas of the body where women will store fat and the inner thigh is one of them."

It may be difficult to accept, but some people will never be able to achieve a thigh-gap without surgery. Just like you can't grow larger breasts, or make yourself a few inches taller. Against my better judgement, I found myself being drawn in to wanting a thigh-gap, the reality of my thighs touching hitting me every time I looked in the mirror. But how boring would the world be if we were all the same shape and size?

The conclusion I've come to is that the quest for body perfection is as old as Barbie (she's 54, in case you were wondering – she looks great for her age), and as pointless as rehab for Lindsay Lohan. The thigh-gap is to the catwalk what shaving your head is to celebrity breakdowns – one looks strange without the other. ■

**"A lot of people are looking at the thigh-gap as the ultimate accomplishment in weight loss"**



Model Cara Delevingne with the thigh-gap that got the nation going under the knife

\*name has been changed

## Exercises to tone your inner thighs NATURALLY

Personal trainer Matt Field gives us the low-down

### Side Lunges

Stand with your hands on your hips and your feet hip-width apart. Lunge out to your right with your right leg. You want to land with your heel first followed by your forefoot. Your right knee and hip should be at a 90-degree angle. Your left leg should be straight out to the side. Repeat on your left side with your left leg.

### Crossover Lunges

Step right and lower into a side lunge. Bring your left leg behind your right, lowering your knee towards the floor. Push off your left foot to stand. Repeat starting with a left side lunge.

### Lying Abductor Leg Raise

Lie on your side on the floor with both legs fully extended. Exhale as you lift your top leg as high as you can, then inhale as you lower your leg back down, stopping just before your leg touches back down. Repeat and then switch sides.



**1 1/2** How long liposuction surgery takes (hours)

**16**

Number of potential side effects from liposuction

**985**

Number of likes the 'elusive gap fan club' page has on Facebook at time of going to print

## THIGH-GAP BY NUMBERS

**£2,670**

How much liposuction costs

**18**

Minimum age limit

**45**

minutes the Lipoglaze treatment takes

**6**

How long it takes to fully recover from liposuction (weeks)

