I tried to get abs at SXSW but couldn’t handle the burn

The cosmetic procedure pop-up is as upbeat as I imagined. It’s 80 degrees and humid in Austin, Texas today. It feels like a swamp, really, but all the women at RealSelf’s house couldn’t care less about the heat. They want their free beauty treatments, and I specifically came to get abs.

RealSelf is a website and app that’s been around for a decade. It provides people more detailed information about cosmetic procedures through user-generated reviews and photos, and it makes money through doctors’ on-site advertisements. For SXSW, the company branded a house to offer people free consultations and treatments.

Photo by Ashley Carman / The Verge

Visitors can get their faces microneedled, have a breast augmentation consultation, or have either Dysport or Restylane injected into their faces to get rid of wrinkles, plump their lips, or erase frown lines. The injections take place in a backyard tent that faces out to an alleyway, not exactly a spa. Still, at least one influencer took advantage of the free injections, as well as many other regular people. I don’t know who she is, even though I took her photo, but my PR contact told me she’s an influencer, and I believe it. A man filmed her having the procedure done, and she made getting your face injected look graceful and pleasant. I was influenced, honestly.

PHoto by Ashley Carman / The Verge

I’m a nervous wreck, though, and allergic to most everything in this world, so instead of injections, I wanted to try

Emsculpt, which forces your muscles to contract through targeted electromagnetic energy. It’s a low-risk treatment and non-invasive. The only caveat is that you can’t try it if you have metal implanted in your body, including a copper IUD.

I ate queso last night, so I figured I could use Emsculpt to not only erase fat from my stomach but also to forget my bad SXSW eating and drinking decisions. My PR guide tells me this dream won’t happen, though, because I would need four, 30-minute sessions over two weeks to see results. Whatever. I have no metal in my body, and I want to try for abs.

I laid on a bed and a woman walks me through the no-metal rule and then requests that I not use my phone because the machine could short circuit it, or something like that. This was fine with me, as I just had my PR liaison take my photo.

I unbuttoned my pants, and she strapped the Emsculpt to my abdomen. She turned it on, and I felt my abs contract without my control. One session is supposed to equal 20,000 sit-ups, but my session was probably like 10 crunches. I couldn’t handle the Emsculpt.

One strong contraction lasted a couple seconds. I hadn’t planned on taking advantage of the full 30-minute session because of time constraints, but I couldn’t lie through it anyway. I wanted to stop after three minutes. It didn’t hurt necessarily, but I didn’t enjoy the lack of control over when my muscles contracted.

I’d rather just work out, to be real, because at least then I’d know when I’m going to do a crunch instead of having a machine automate it for me. The woman who used the machine before me loved it and wished she had $3,250 to complete the full series, which is the average cost of Emsculpt, according to RealSelf. This woman speculated that celebrities get this

done all the time and that’s how they maintain their abs and butts, which is kind of mind-blowing. Celebrities can get abs just by laying around?

Clearly, as much as I wish this wasn’t true, I’m not a celebrity or an influencer, as I couldn’t handle even the most basic beauty experience.

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