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Acupuncture: The New Facelift?

Can those tiny little needles really get rid of your wrinkles?

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WebMD Feature

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Jawline getting a bit saggy? That great sense of humor of yours leaving you with some not-so-funny laugh lines? Furrowed brow making you look like you're in a perpetual state of grouchiness?

If you're thinking of getting a little work done on your face, a younger-looking face may lie at the end of some needles -- acupuncture needles, that is.

Can acupuncture really give you the face you thought you'd lost forever? Yes, say the acupuncturists who offer the procedure. Not really, say more conventional cosmetic surgeons.

Smoothing Out the Lines

Martha Lucas, PhD, LAc, a Colorado acupuncturist, says after a series of 10 treatments (twice a week for five weeks), skin becomes more delicate and fair, and there are fewer wrinkles. She says the treatments also result in an erasing of fine lines and a reduction of deeper lines, less sagginess, a lifting of droopy eyelids, and a clearing or reduction of age spots. And, as an added bonus, she says, there is an overall rejuvenation that is not confined to your face.

"Cosmetic acupuncture is a good alternative for women who don't want the side effects associated with a surgical facelift," Lucas says.

The procedure works for men too, says Lucas, although not as many men request it.

Acupuncture, a form of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), is designed to free up chi, or energy. When the needles -- approximately 30-40 -- are applied to the body and face, production of collagen and elastin may be stimulated, says Lucas, and skin is "plumped up."

By addressing other parts of the body in addition to the face, acupuncture assists the body's ability to support the "facelift."

Making the Entire Body Younger

Making the Entire Body Younger

"We're helping you to be younger -- and look younger -- by improving your energy from the inside out," Lucas explains. "This still is TCM -- it's not just about the face; it's about the whole body."

"Chinese medicine is the true antiaging medicine," Lucas says. "It helps your own body create a more youthful appearance."

Lucas has been offering this procedure for approximately four and a half years, and last year she began training other acupuncturists in cosmetic acupuncture throughout the United States and Canada. As the procedure gets more publicity, she says, more clients are requesting it, increasing the need for acupuncturists trained in the technique, which requires special acupuncture points and different needling techniques than traditional acupuncture.

Cosmetic acupuncture is not for everyone, says Lucas. Though acupuncture has been used to help people with migraines, seizure disorders, or high blood pressure, for example, these people are probably not good candidates for cosmetic acupuncture. For most people, however, Lucas says, acupuncture "lifts" are a great alternative for those who don't want more drastic procedures.

Columbia, Md. acupuncturist Della Aubrey-Miller, MAc, LAc, was trained in facial rejuvenation acupuncture, another form of cosmetic acupuncture, which she says is also effective in smoothing out lines, erasing shallow lines, and softening deeper furrows. Still, she says, like surgery, the effectiveness of the treatment depends on what you're starting with. "Working on a 40-year-old face is different from a 60-year-old face," she says. For that reason, both she and Lucas suggest starting the treatments when you're in your 30s, or 40s at the latest.

Increasing Energy

What cosmetic acupuncture does, says Aubrey-Miller, is "stir the energy pot." Moving energy through the body, with needles not only in the face but also the feet, legs, arms, head, and ears, stimulates collagen production and brings blood to the face.

Aubrey-Miller's recommended course of treatment is 12 to 16 weeks, with monthly maintenance treatments after that. "It's something useful to do for yourself," she says, and you don't have to worry about recovering from surgery or side effects such as bruising or nerve damage. For many of her clients, it's also a mini-vacation of sorts. "For many people, this is the only quiet time they spend on themselves. Usually, once the needles are in, they just fall asleep for 30 minutes."

Not a Cure-all

Cosmetic acupuncture is not a cure-all, Aubrey-Miller emphasizes. "How you live your life will impact what your face looks like," she says. "You can't correct a bad lifestyle with needles."

Another nonsurgical facelift is also attracting attention. The PanG nonsurgical facelift is a series of office-based treatments that apply radiofrequency energy, high voltage galvanic electric current, and high frequency ultrasound to produce "facelift-type" effects on the soft tissues of the face and neck. It takes 20 treatments over 10 weeks to produce these effects, says R. Stephen Mulholland, MD, of Toronto. "This is like body building for the face," says Mulholland.

Mulholland admits that the treatment offers only about 30% of the effect of a conventional facelift. "You're getting a lift effect," he says. "But for best results, you would still want a facelift."

Can't Do It All

Rhoda Narins, MD, president of the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery, says she thinks acupuncture has its place, especially as a pain reliever. But she doesn't believe in it as a replacement for cosmetic treatments such as surgery, Botox injections, and the like. "Acupuncture doesn't stop the muscle movement that creates lines," she says. "Botox does." Nor can acupuncture tighten or "fill" the skin as surgery or injectable fillers such as Restylane can.

Too many "extreme makeovers" on television are leading many of us to believe that a new look is a no-muss, no-fuss proposition. "That's just not the case," says Narins. "Changing your appearance is not something that should be taken lightly."

SOURCES: Martha Lucas, PhD, LAc, licensed acupuncturist, Denver. Della Aubrey-Miller, MAc, LAc, licensed acupuncturist, Columbia, Md. R. Stephen Mulholland, MD, owner, SpaMedica, Toronto, Calif. Rhoda Narins, MD, president, American Society for Dermatologic Surgery, New York.
