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ASK THE DOCTOR

Topical Alternatives to Cosmetic Surgical Procedures

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Q: *Many cosmetic surgical procedures can be risky, painful, and very expensive. Are there any topical alternatives to undergoing these common cosmetic procedures?*

A: A great number of safe cosmetic procedures can be performed in a doctor's office, either with or without anesthesia. The average cost of these procedures ranges from about \$450 to \$750 per treatment. However, these procedures also come with their share of possible side effects, including pain, bleeding, bruising, allergic reactions, and infection. Furthermore, certain procedures, such as Botox® injections, have been associated with more dangerous side effects. These cosmetic procedures and injections produce effects that tend to last three to five months, but must be repeated for continual results.

Topical products may produce results similar to those of costly cosmetic procedures. Although the results may be slower to appear, they will likely continue for as long as the topical products are used. This month, I will examine two commonly performed cosmetic procedures and possible topical alternatives.

LIP-ENLARGEMENT PROCEDURES

As we age, our lips tend to lose volume, contour, and moisture. These changes can be corrected with injections of collagen or Restylane®, fat transplants, or other office-based cosmetic procedures. Such lip-enlargement treatments help create fuller, more voluptuous lips, commonly known as "Paris lips."

Newly formulated topical "lip plumpers" allow for lip enhancement in your home, without having to travel to a doctor's office. Topical lip plumpers contain various types of natural plant-derived irritants that increase lip volume by increasing blood flow to the tissues. They also contain natural moisturizers such as squalane and jojoba oil that smooth the lips and lessen the appearance of fine lines and creases. Some lip plumpers also contain natural antioxidants like red tea, as well as other nutrients to help allay sun damage and premature aging.

Topical lip plumpers have become an extremely popular alternative to doctor-administered lip-enlargement procedures, and occasionally are used in combination with them. Dermatologist-formulated lip plumpers tend to produce the best results.

WRINKLE-RELAXING TREATMENTS

Botox® injections and other muscle-immobilizing, injectable treatments have become the world's most popular cosmetic procedures. These procedures are quite expensive, ranging from about \$300 to \$1,000 per treatment, depending on the areas to be treated and the amount of medication used.

Botox®, a very dilute preparation of the bacterial toxin that causes botulism, is injected directly into the muscle bodies involved in facial expression, thereby paralyzing the muscles. These injections take effect in one to four days and tend to last three to five months, depending on the depth of the facial-expression lines and strength of the affected muscle groups.

Many side effects can result from these injections. Paralysis of other muscle groups (though usually temporary) may occur due to local spreading of the medication. Additional side effects may include pain, infection, double vision, droopy eyelids, nerve damage, and facial asymmetry. More severe effects are also possible. Recently, several cases of botulism resulting in total-body paralysis were caused by the use of a botulinum toxin product that was not approved for human use.



These widely publicized mishaps have led to growing use of topical, non-toxic wrinkle-relaxing agents. Such agents work by weakening facial-muscle contractions without causing paralysis. Two of the most commonly and safely used wrinkle-relaxing agents—acetyl hexapeptide-3 and gamma amino butyl acid—are now included in many topical, dermatologist-formulated products. It may take several weeks to notice results, but these products produce noticeable improvement in facial-expression lines that usually lasts for as long as the product is used. Dermatologist-formulated wrinkle-relaxing formulas are suggested for optimal results.

Gary Goldfaden, MD, is a clinical dermatologist and lifetime member of the American Academy of Dermatology. He is the founder of Academy Dermatology in Hollywood, FL, and COSMESIS Skin Care. Dr. Goldfaden is a member of the Life Extension Foundation's Scientific Advisory Board. All Cosmesis products are available online.

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