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Acupuncture Facelifts

Nip and Tuck or Pins and Needles?



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When you look in the mirror, what's the first thing you notice? If you're like most women from about age 35 on, it might be those little lines that seem to be creating a map of North America on your face. OK, maybe I'm speaking only for myself, but ever since I hit that milestone birthday, I've been preoccupied with those, er, invaders from another decade. Couple natural aging with years of squinting and straining behind computer screens, and you've put yourself squarely in the demographic for a (gasp!) facelift.



Here's the thing: Yes, I'd LOVE to minimize my forehead lines (especially that scrunch line between the eyebrows), and who wouldn't? Lucky for us, there are loads of options available to help ease the signs of life on our faces. Injectables (like Botox), fillers (like Restylane) and, yes, surgery are all possibilities. But what about a kinder, gentler way?

Needles, Needles Everywhere

Acupuncture, a staple of Chinese medicine for more than 5,000 years, is making headlines as the latest way to smooth the signs of aging. Popularly called the "acupuncture facelift," this new twist on an ancient therapy is gaining popularity among everyday folks and the rich-and-famous. Why? Great results, no recovery and it is 100 percent natural.

First things first: Experts insist that the media nomenclature is incorrect. "I would never use the term 'acupuncture facelift' since it implies quick results that can only be achieved through surgery and injections," says Charles Yarborough, L.Ac., director of Hamptons Health Circle in Pasadena, CA, and founder of the American Cosmetic Acupuncture Bureau. "This will only create disappointment [for the client] and is a disservice to our profession." Yarborough believes that people looking for a quick fix may see the term "facelift" and assume the results will be

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similar to a surgical procedure. "If I saw the words, 'acupuncture facelift,' I'd go elsewhere ... 'Facial acupuncture' is more appropriate because it includes the concept of whole-body rejuvenation," he says.

And this is where acupuncture really differentiates itself from other medical disciplines. The focus on the entire body and spirit deviates from traditional medicine, which often treats only a problem.

According to most plastic surgeons, you can't expect dramatic results without serious recovery time. They may be right, but with more and more people opting for a natural, rather than overdone, look, acupuncture seems to be fitting the bill quite nicely. "The Baby Boom generation is seeking holistic alternatives to the mainstream 'imperatives' of cosmetic surgery and related procedures, like Botox, and it is their interest that has brought facial acupuncture to the attention of a wider group," says Mary Elizabeth Wakefield, L.Ac., M.S., M. M., AAOM Educator of the Year, Adjunct Professor of Facial Acupuncture, Acupuncture & Integrative Medicine College, in Berkeley, CA. Wakefield is one of the leading authorities in facial acupuncture, and she has trained thousands of practitioners in her unique method of facial rejuvenation.

Wakefield's services have been sought out by movers and shakers on both coasts. In fact, she even treated clients at the Academy Awards in 2006 (because most of her clients are high-profile and in the public eye, they declined to be interviewed). The more famous the person, it seems, the more they'd like us to believe that they are naturally ageless! For the Oscars, Wakefield created a Diamond Acupuncture Facial, which used fine needles tipped with diamonds. "While the use of diamonds in the context of a facial acupuncture treatment might seem to be purely esthetic," Wakefield says, "there is, in fact, a long-standing tradition about using diamonds in the treatment of, among other things, depression." Needless to say, Wakefield's day at the Oscars was busy, indeed.

Surgery vs. Acupuncture

Obviously, the more invasive the procedure, the more dramatic the results. A traditional, full facelift can produce striking results — lifting sagging skin on the neck, cheek area and jowls, and even "erasing" some of the lines and deep wrinkles on various areas of the face. However, this type of surgery is not without risks. Undergoing general anesthesia, the risk of infection and a protracted recovery period (typically anywhere from two to four weeks) are just some of the potential downsides to traditional cosmetic surgery.



There are other things to consider, as well: Missed time from work or family during recovery, swelling, redness and, oh yes, there's the pain. For some people, though, the risks and discomfort are worth the end result. For others, a more organic approach may be best. "Since the trend in the beauty world is away from the overtly 'worked on' look, facial acupuncture has found a niche of its own," Yarborough says. "Facial acupuncture has been used widely in the entertainment industry."

Cost also can be a factor. Though prices for both surgery and acupuncture vary widely by region and the experience of the practitioner, chew on this: In 2004, Americans spent some \$9 billion on cosmetic surgery procedures. And that amount doesn't include time lost from work for recovery. Interestingly, it's not only the super-rich who seek out surgery. Studies show that the average income of people considering and having cosmetic surgery is \$60,000.

Acupuncture, on the other hand, is a go-at-your-own pace type of program. You can do as many or as few sessions as you like, though experts say the best results come from regular treatments. "The standard course of treatments [for facial rejuvenation] is approximately 10 sessions, with periodic tune-ups," Yarborough says. "Some practitioners require twice-weekly visits, some require more. Depending on the technique, a treatment will last from a half hour to an hour and a half."

So, What's an Acupuncture Treatment Like?

Both Wakefield and Yarborough explain that the purpose of facial rejuvenation is to invigorate the entire body, which helps improve the tone and texture of the face. One of the basic reasons lines and wrinkles appear on our faces is due to lack of collagen production as we age. According to Wakefield, facial rejuvenation treatments improve facial circulation, thereby improving the formation of collagen in the skin. This collagen helps to "fill in" the creases, smoothing and often erasing fine lines and wrinkles.

Before embarking on a program of facial improvement via acupuncture, be sure to do your research — and be sure to have a realistic set of expectations. If your friend recently underwent a full, surgical facelift, you have to realize that your results via acupuncture will not be as dramatic; however, you also will not have to deal with the downtime, drains in your face, scar tissue, swelling, redness and pain. Enough said.

Wakefield's Constitutional Facial Acupuncture Renewal program, which she created and teaches across the country and the world, focuses on the primary theories of Oriental medicine. "The philosophy of Oriental medicine regards the face and body as being intrinsically linked; this is because the energy meridians of acupuncture, while arising in the lower regions (the trunk and legs), traverse the entire body, traveling through the face and arriving at the top of the head. Consequently, in addressing any disharmony within the body with acupuncture treatments, the face is, by definition, affected in a beneficial manner," she says. During a typical session, Wakefield says, "fine needles are placed at a variety of acupuncture points on the face, neck and around the eyes to stimulate the body's natural energies, or Qi. Since muscle groups are addressed as well the acupuncture points, the face lifts itself, via the acupuncture points, through the muscles' toning and tightening action. The needles also stimulate blood and circulation, which improves facial color."

While the results obviously are not nearly as drastic as surgery, Yarborough contends that many of his patients do see immediate change. "With the first treatment, most people will notice their skin emits a wonderful, healthy glow as circulation to their face is enhanced. Their eyes usually sparkle and they look vibrant," he says. "Patients have told me that, after an initial treatment, their friends and families have asked them why they look so good. Within several treatments, patients may find that fine lines are minimized and deeper ones are decreasing. They may notice that the darkness and puffiness under their eyes is fading."

Yarborough uses a technique that incorporates the protocol pioneered by Wakefield. "One of the unique features of the Wakefield technique," he says, "is that it also addresses facial muscle tonicity, which means I would be working on the patient's jowls as well."

Upon beginning a facial rejuvenation session, Yarborough says, a patient should expect a full consultation with the practitioner. This is important because Oriental medicine treatments are individualized to each patient. Next, a full acupuncture

treatment based on the client's metabolism is conducted, followed by the application of fine facial pins. A warm, herbal face mask is applied, and the treatment ends with the application of a soothing ointment and the use of cool, jade rollers to massage the face, and acupuncture to further stimulate the body. "Patients float out of the office," Yarborough says.

Finding Your Match

Before you choose a practitioner, be sure to do your homework. Both Wakefield and Yarborough caution against seeing anyone who claims you can receive results equal to surgery from acupuncture treatments. Also, be sure the practitioner is licensed in the state in which he/she practices.

Finally, if you are still on the fence between surgery and something a bit less invasive, consider going the gentler route first — in the worst case, you might find yourself a little more relaxed and ready to explore — calmly — other options in your quest for the fountain of youth.

Robin Heinz Bratslavsky

Contributing writer to DERMAdoctor.com.

(Any topic discussed in this article is not intended as medical advice. If you have a medical concern, please check with your doctor.)

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