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SKIN DEEP

# Hold the Chemicals, Bring on the Needles

By NORA ISAACS  
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JANE BECKER, a composer and solo pianist, celebrated her 50th birthday at the dermatologist, paying \$1,500 for shots of Restylane and Botox. But three months later, their wrinkle-smoothing effects wore off. So, she turned to a less-artificial youth tonic: facial acupuncture.



Natasha Calzatti for The New York Times  
**STICKER SHOCK** Cosmetic acupuncture has caught the attention of increasing numbers of women who want to slow signs of aging, but don't want to undergo surgery or to inject chemicals.

Like many women who have tried acupuncture in pursuit of beauty, Ms. Becker hoped that having needles strategically inserted into her face would be cheaper and last longer than her birthday injections.

Ms. Becker, now 53, started with 10 sessions in five weeks (\$1,000) and has gone for monthly maintenance since (\$105 a session).

Acupuncture didn't end up being much of a bargain, but it pays in other ways, she said.

"I can really see a difference in my face," said Ms. Becker, who sees Steven Sonmore, a licensed acupuncturist in Minneapolis. "It looks younger, smoother, brighter and uplifted."

Early adopters like Ms. Becker first spread word of the virtues of a so-called acupuncture face-lift. Then before the 2005 Academy Awards, a crew of facial acupuncturists descended on Soho House, a makeshift celebrity hangout in Los Angeles, and A-listers jumped at the chance to transform their skin from the inside out.

Now, thanks to more robust marketing, cosmetic acupuncture has caught the attention of more of the wrinkled public. Its holistic approach appeals in particular to women who want to slow signs of aging, but don't want to undergo surgery or to inject chemicals.

Whether it is called facial rejuvenation, acupuncture face-lift or cosmetic acupuncture, the aim is to tackle wrinkles, muscle tension that may be causing unsightly lines, as well



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

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as systematic issues standing between you and glowing skin. Just as with traditional needling, putting needles on acupuncture points stimulates the body's natural energies, called qi, but with added benefits.

Whether cosmetic acupuncture works has yet to be proved. Some randomized, controlled studies have shown that acupuncture is an effective adjunctive treatment for hypertension, chronic pain, headaches and back pain. But there is no peer-reviewed research demonstrating that acupuncture diminishes wrinkles.

Still, an industry devoted to needling for youthful skin has grown in recent years.

"There's a rise in interest all over the country," said Martha Lucas, a licensed acupuncturist who helped create the Mei Zen cosmetic acupuncture system in 2003. She teaches a dozen seminars annually to rooms of more than 30 budding facialists. "L.A. used to be the biggest market. But now we get people from the Midwest calling."

Practitioners of this style of cosmetic acupuncture called Mei Zen ("beautiful person" in Chinese) offer their services in 16 states.

Mary Elizabeth Wakefield, a licensed acupuncturist who headed the 2005 Oscars event, has trained more than 2,000 teachers in 40 states in her technique: constitutional facial acupuncture. This year to date, she has trained almost 1,200 practitioners, up from 100 in 2001, she said. "For centuries, the ancient Chinese have promoted health and beauty," Ms. Wakefield said, "but we've taken it to another level."

Part of the reason is savvy marketing: Ms. Lucas's monthly seminars include pointers on taking effective before-and-after pictures, and creating fruitful relationships with dermatologists. She even passes out T-shirts that proclaim "Cosmetic Acupuncture Works." A half-dozen women interviewed for this article said they have seen puffiness decrease, under-eye bags disappear and lines diminish or soften.

Dr. Richard G. Glogau, a clinical professor of dermatology at University of California, San Francisco, said these changes were quite possible. "It's obvious that people carry around a lot of muscle tension in their face, which gives them frowns and wrinkles," he said. "My take on this is that they are producing relaxation in the muscles."

But Dr. Glogau doesn't believe that facial acupuncture can increase collagen, another claim of some practitioners.

During a recent session at the Claremont Resort and Spa in Berkeley, Calif., Andy Seplow, a licensed acupuncturist, told me as much as he used tweezers to guide tiny needles into a deep wrinkle between my eyebrows.

A needle penetrating the dermis would create damage, Dr. Glogau agreed, and the body would respond by producing collagen.

But does the doctor think the procedure could get rid of wrinkles? "My general understanding is that acupuncture really just involves a handful of punctures," he said. "It's unlikely that you will get significant collagen production from that."

That said, holding tension in one's jaws or brows can make a face appear strained. I am a teeth grinder with a tight jaw. Mr. Seplow inserted needles into my jaw area to relax it. He also assessed my systemic issues. Red blotches above my cheeks, he said, were a sign of sluggish digestion, so he put needles into my feet and legs for this.

Many cosmetic acupuncturists pride themselves on their holistic service. "The way I look



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at it, your health is reflected in your skin,” said Anita Lee, a licensed acupuncturist who has a private practice that specializes in women’s health in Manhattan. Because acupuncture facials improve circulation and unblock stuck energy, Ms. Lee said, “they help people heal from the inside out.”

One kind of cosmetic acupuncture incorporates microcurrents. Dr. Peter G. Hanson, a licensed acupuncturist, uses a machine which has probes that connect with facial needles to deliver bursts of microcurrent. He first used this method to stimulate the facial nerves in patients with conditions like Bell’s palsy, which involves paralysis of the face. But Dr. Hanson soon realized it could help his middle-age clients, too. The current, he said, tones and increases the volume of underlying muscles, which “makes the skin young again.”

Not likely, said Dr. Richard D’Amico, the president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

“First of all, increasing tone does not increase muscle volume,” said Dr. D’Amico, an assistant clinical professor of plastic surgery at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. And “anything that stimulates muscles will cause skin to fold even more and the wrinkles will get worse.”

The doctors clearly disagree. “If you don’t exercise the face muscles, you’ll get more wrinkles,” Dr. Hanson said.

For some, acupuncture facials serve as a back door into alternative medicine. Sheila Schmidt, 35, a telecom consultant from Denver, started facial acupuncture after noticing crow’s feet. They diminished, but she still goes for sessions. “I leave feeling more balanced and less anxious,” she said.

Ms. Becker, too, has come to think of her acupuncture facials as a kind of preventive medicine. “If I have any stress on my kidneys, liver and spleen, it shows up on my face,” she said. “Keeping my systems healthy is a win-win all around.”

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