



Search for Youth Turns to the East

* Many women are looking at cosmetic acupuncture as an alternative to surgery

SANTA FE -- In search of a way to turn back the clock, many baby boomers are willing to try almost anything to look a few years younger.

Plastic surgery, Botox injections and liposuction are rites of passage for many women hitting their 40s. Some women, however, are rejecting the knife and its modern accompaniments and choosing alternatives like acupuncture or massage instead.

Cosmetic acupuncture combines traditional Oriental medicine with a modern application, bringing the circulation of the body's life force -- or Qi (pronounced Chee) in Chinese medicine -- to the face. Once there, the Qi increases blood circulation, moistens skin and promotes collagen production, according to those who practice it.

The procedure plumps out wrinkles, reduces sagging and improves skin texture, practitioners say.

The result has significantly less impact than cosmetic surgery but also costs less, doesn't require anesthesia and has no recovery time or serious side effects.

But not all doctors of Oriental medicine believe the procedure is worthwhile, or necessary. Some wonder if it isn't just a way to cash in on American's obsession with youth.

"I just wonder about it being a hustle," said Selah Chamberlain, a doctor of

Oriental medicine in Taos. "I figure aging is something we all do. I tend to stick to people who have an illness."

Critics, including some plastic surgeons, point out that there are no clinical studies proving the effectiveness of cosmetic acupuncture.

But that is not stopping many women from undergoing "face lifts," breast augmentation and even abdominal sculpting at the hands of acupuncturists.

'Why not do it?'

On a recent afternoon, Bridget Adams, a furniture wholesaler, lay on a table at doctor of oriental medicine George Mandel's downtown Santa Fe office looking rather calm, despite the nearly 50 needles placed in traditional acupuncture points on her face and head, as well as her crow's feet and laugh lines.

"Believe it or not, it feels good," Adams said. "It feels like a bunch of electricity going through your face."

For Adams, the procedure is a middle ground between what she sees as two camps -- those dedicated to surgery, and those who wear their wrinkles as a badge of honor and shun all attempts to lessen them.

"I think this is a reasonable in-between thing you can do," she said. "In my experience, it works, it's way less expensive (than surgery), it lasts three to five years, why not do it?"

The cosmetic acupuncture procedures are often done in a series of 12 one-hour sessions because they

have a cumulative effect, said Peggy Meents, a doctor of oriental medicine and graduate of the Southwest Acupuncture College. The treatments average \$100 per session. Meents also does breast augmentation, which she said makes breasts firmer, not bigger.

One of the benefits of cosmetic acupuncture is a focus on a person's overall health, practitioners say. All patients are examined before the procedure, so other health problems can be addressed at the same time. Needles are also inserted in a patient's feet, wrists and legs to help strengthen the internal organs that in Chinese medicine are believed to boost blood circulation and care for the skin.

"I'm treating not just the obvious but what is going on inside," Meents said.

Acupuncturists are quick to point out that they are not performing surgery and that the results will be more natural.

"You're not going to look like this," Mandel said as he flattened his cheeks toward his ears with his hands. Many of his clients are people in the public eye and most don't want to look like they've had a face lift, he said.

The procedure should also be accompanied by other naturally healthy activities. Mandel tells his patients to eat right, exercise and get enough sleep. Most practitioners also recommend that patients come in once a month after the initial series of treatments to maintain the results of the procedure.

"It works, but it's no magic bullet," he said.

Satisfied customer

Eileen Brennan-Martinez had just turned 53 and noticed that her eyes seemed heavier -- "Things had starting going south," she said -- when she began to think it might be time to look into surgery.

"I just wasn't feeling very self-confident," she said.

Brennan-Martinez, who is an esthetician, or non-medical skin care specialist, decided to try acupuncture before doing something drastic. She has completed the series and continues to see Meents, who did the initial series, once a month or so for a one-hour treatment.

The results, she said, have been fantastic. There is less sagging around her eyes, her jaw line is more defined and her cheeks look sculpted, she said. People often compliment her on her skin and ask if she has gotten "work done."

"I say, 'Yes, but not the kind of work you think,' " she said, adding that she is no longer considering surgery.

Japanese face massage

Ko bi do, a Japanese facial massage, is also purported to improve the condition of the skin and muscle tone, without the use of needles.

The results, said Janis Gordon, a doctor of Oriental medicine and ko bi do practitioner, is like "a mini-face lift."

Gordon massages the face, neck and shoulders for 80 minutes. She strokes, kneads and applies pressure to acupuncture points.

The massage improves circulation and releases tension, which can cause the face to crease and wrinkle, she said.

"People don't realize how much tension they carry in their faces... when you want to scream at

somebody, you end up storing an enormous amount of tension in your face," she said.

Lovelyn Bassani, 44, an operations manager at a software development company, receives ko bi do every other month or so. Though she doesn't rule out having surgery, she prefers "to not go that route if there are natural ways to alleviate your problems. The massage will keep you looking younger a lot longer."

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