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Acupuncture gets a face lift and much more

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By Olivia Barker, USA TODAY

In their never-ending quest to combat sags, bags and lines, age-conscious Americans are turning their bodies into pincushions.



For some facelift customers, a bunch of tiny needles beats one big one filled with botulism.

By Charlie Neibergall, AP

Forget the knife and syringe. The tool of choice for a growing number of wrinkle-phobes is a needle — scores of them.

Cosmetic acupuncture practitioners and patients swear by the results: Foreheads are smoothed, tummies tucked, breasts lifted and double chins become single once again. And as tales of botched Botox injections spread — the lawsuit filed by a sickened Beverly Hills socialite; at least four Botox recipients now seriously ill with botulism — acupuncturists say their non-toxic technique is proving ever more alluring.

"A lot of women are just afraid," says Martha Lucas, who says the number seeking treatment has quadrupled since she opened her Denver practice three years ago. (Lucas guesses that the number going under the needle nationally constitutes a "small fraction" of the more than 128,000 Americans who, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, had face lifts in 2003.) "They don't want to take the chance they're going to come out not only with an ice bag on but with some potentially more serious side effect."

And there's the argument that cosmetic acupuncture, like traditional acupuncture, takes a holistic approach to

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treatment, so not only do eyebrows unfurrow, but "you feel better overall," says Christine Kleinschmidt, who practices in St. Louis. "You're sleeping better, you've got more energy and better digestion. ... It's not just skin-deep."

Physicians find the fountain-of-youth claims far-fetched. "To be fair, most people look better after a good night's sleep, after a vacation or after being outside in fresh air, so I'm not saying there can't be some benefit," says ASPS president Scott Spear. But "I personally have not seen any evidence that cosmetic acupuncture has any significant or long-term benefits."

Lucas' protocol of 10 treatments over five weeks goes for \$1,200, less than one-quarter of the cost of the average face lift, although the results, which Lucas says last three to five years, are far from permanent. Each session takes 45 to 60 minutes and involves 60 to 70 needles. Kleinschmidt charges \$1,800 for a typical course of 12 treatments, not including monthly or bimonthly maintenance sessions.

MaryAgnes Klock calls Lucas a "miracle worker." The Dallas resident says her jowls are gone, her eyelids aren't drooping, and she has dropped 35 pounds. Klock, who works in sales, won't divulge her age, but she will say that the other day someone guessed she was 40.

Acupuncturists say that while business is busy for weddings and holidays, the future lies in preventive procedures.

"I wish I'd known," Klock says. "I would have had it done in my 30s."

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