

WSJ.com

March 13, 2015

Circulation: 4,643,992

Beyond Botox: New Anti-Aging Treatments That Will Leave You Looking Like Yourself

A host of new, less invasive—and less distorting—anti-aging treatments has cropped up for women who want to look younger without resorting to face-freezing injections

AS MY FRIENDS and I lounged on couches this past awards season, assessing what traveled down the Oscars' and Golden Globes' red carpets, we developed a drinking game: "Find the Frozen Face." Once we started, the over-injected foreheads, cheeks and lips preoccupied us more than the fashion.

Not that such suspect beauty is unusual or new. In the past several years, a certain uniform look of unsettlingly smooth, plumped skin and over-pouty lips has become the norm for women of means and fame who want to look young. In 2008, *New York Magazine* dubbed it "the new, new face." But recently it's begun to seem more like the old-new face—and many women, particularly of the younger generation, are wanting something that looks natural, less overtly plastic.

That's something that Dr. Haideh Hirmand, a New York-based aesthetic plastic surgeon, often hears from her clients. "People will come in and say to me, 'I want to look like myself and I'm afraid of looking different. These [celebrities] on the red carpet have access to the best doctors. Why do they all end up looking the way they look?'" (Dr. Hirmand's answer is that a sort of collective aesthetic dysmorphia has set in: "[It starts to seem normal] if, all of sudden, everyone has big lips, for example.")



Last spring, Dr. Hirmand opened a new medi-spa that focuses on noninvasive procedures using lasers as well as “energy treatments,” which use ultrasound, radio-frequency waves or micro-currents, to firm the skin. The basic idea behind all of them is to use heat to trick the dermis, the deeper layer of skin, into thinking it’s been injured so that it compensates by churning out more collagen (the natural stuff your body produces, not the kind that’s injected). It’s as if you’re recovering from a burn—think of the baby soft skin that comes in after one heals—but without pain or scarring. The added benefit is that these treatments have little or no recovery time. In most cases, you can go on your lunch hour and none of your colleagues will be the wiser.

Because of recent technological improvements, said Dr. Hirmand, lasers and energy treatments are now proliferating through the industry. She added, “In 10 or 20 years, they might make some surgery obsolete.”

That remains to be seen, but even in their current form, these treatments are certainly gaining popularity with aestheticians and their clients. One such champion is New York-based facialist Joanna Vargas, who has used LED light treatments for 9 years at her midtown spa. Her latest noninvasive tool is a radio-frequency machine she procured after director Sofia Coppola, a longtime Vargas client, fell in love with it at a spa in Paris. Ms. Vargas calls the treatment the Super 8 because she recommends a series of eight sessions in as many weeks for clients over 40; the price, which also includes one facial, is \$5,625 with Ms. Vargas or \$3,600 with one of her trained aestheticians.

Ms. Vargas imported the machine early last fall and said that she started her actress clients such as Naomi Watts and Maggie Gyllenhaal on treatments around the end of the year so they could look their freshest and best during awards season. “You don’t want to walk into a room and have people wonder what you’ve done to your face,” said Ms. Vargas. “You want people to think you’re getting sleep or you’re glowing or happy.”

Ms. Vargas reported that the machine has proved so popular it’s now become difficult to score an appointment for it. “We’ve been taking before and after pictures,” she said, “so people can look at that and see that they really do look better.”

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Proponents of these treatments emphasize that they're part of a regular maintenance routine—and that it's best to start while in your 30s or 40s. Practitioners like Ms. Vargas and Dr. Hirmand maintain that laser and energy treatments can be effective for women into their 60s, however. There are still limits. "With people who have older, looser skin, I can do energy until next year and it's not going to work," said Dr. Hirmand.

Los Angeles-based aesthetician Kate Somerville offers up her longtime client, 47-year-old actress Kate Walsh, as evidence of this strategy's efficacy. "She has not had one injectable," said Ms. Somerville. "But she's been diligent about keeping up her lasers and skin care and she is flawless for her age." She added, "And natural!" Ms. Somerville recently began to offer the "Global Treatment" (starting at \$400 for 15 minutes) which promises to even out discoloration and redness, and to firm skin; as well as "Micro-needling" (\$400 per session) which uses superfine needles moving at 150 hits per second with a serum to stimulate collagen production.

Meanwhile, New York-based dermatologist Dr. Macrene Alexiades-Armenakas will soon introduce a treatment called Profound. She calls it an "injectable laser," which means that she sends the laser to a deeper part of the dermis using fine needles. "We deliver the energy directly where it needs to do its work to maximize wrinkle reduction and skin tightening," she explained. Dr. Alexiades-Armenakas has steadfast views on when to start treatments—in your mid-30s, she said—and the realistic limits of their ability to turn back the clock. "I can make...a 45-year-old look like she's in her 30s, but not her 20s," she explained.

According to some in the field, more women in their 30s are adopting long-term strategies to avoid the need for anything drastic decades later. "Everyone in my generation understands that antiaging is a daily routine. You don't get to a certain age and get a face-lift," said Lauren Remington Platt, 29, founder of beauty on-demand app Vênsette. "You get a monthly facial, stay out of the sun and use serums. The idea is to look like your best self but still yourself."

And though information about these options is just starting to trickle out, said Christina Han, editorial director of e-commerce beauty site Violet Grey, people are buzzing about them: "They know it could be a better solution than [injections or face-lifts.]"