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# In search of good skin

**ISSUE** If you are turning to botox and chemical peels to take years off your face, think again, warns NANDHINI SUNDAR



lifestyle

CAN WE DEFY NATURE? Is it worth meddling with your skin? PHOTO: K. R. DEEPAK

**Y**ou want that supple, glowing skin, which makes you appear a decade younger. You yearn to smoothen out those wrinkles lining your forehead, the crow's feet around your eyes. In vain you seek refuge in creams and miracle cures both herbal and chemical that promise to turn back the clock.

When you seem to have hit the end of the road, you head for botox and chemical peels that promise to transform your face, wiping out many years from it. Leading skin clinics assure you about its safety, lulling any fears or reservations.

Whether botox shots and chemical peels successfully work their magic, sans side effects is debatable. There has been much debate about their success as well as safety, questioning the prudence of opting for it.

Botox, which is medically approved for treating rigid neck muscles, excessive sweating besides treating stroke victims, is best known for its use in smoothening facial wrinkles. Botox injections block nerve impulses to muscles, relaxing them.

Says Janet Martin in her article "Why botox may not be good for you", in *Isnare.com*: "The injections can cause adverse effects in nearby muscles like causing temporary drooping of eyelids when it is given to smooth eye creases. It can also cause systemic reactions or affect distant muscles. Common side effects of botox are headaches, nausea, facial pain, drooling, even ulceration of cornea."

#### Side effects

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reported cases of serious effects like pneumonia, difficulty in swallowing and muscle weakness. According to the FDA, adverse effects surface only weeks after treatment. Numbers compiled by the FDA from 1997-2006

showed 16 deaths, 180 life-threatening complications and 87 hospitalisations linked to botox injections.

Medically too, it has been admitted that injecting more than 2,000 units can be toxic and a normal session is about 50 units.

Chemical peels, which are becoming increasingly popular, are chemical solutions like phenol, trichloroacetic acid (TCA) and alphas hydroxy acids (AHAs) used for removing the outer layers of the facial skin. The treatment is done to remove damaged skin, reduce wrinkles, remove blemishes and uneven pigmentation.

#### Making matters worse

Niyathi opted for a TCA peel recommended by a leading skin clinic as the solution for dark blemishes on her skin. "I underwent the specified number of treatments only to find that not only did the blemishes not disappear, the skin had developed an uneven pigmentation. Worse, my skin cannot be exposed to sun for long hours anymore."

While TCA involves medium depth peeling, phenol is the strongest and produces a deep peel. A brochure published by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons lists the common side effects of any chemical peel as stinging, redness, flaking and peeling of the skin. With a TCA peel, the healed skin continues to produce pigment and needs to be protected from the sun only for a few months after the treatment. But phenol in most cases prevents the skin from producing pigment, skin will permanently have to be protected from sun exposure.

At times, phenol also produces undesired cosmetic results such as uneven pigment changes. A consistent side effect of phenol chemical peel is permanent hypo pigmentation or lightening of the skin. It is hence not recommended for dark skin tones.

Concurs Sangeetha, who incidentally visited the same clinic for treating her acne condition, "Not only did my condition get aggravated, I also had to contend with scars on my skin left by the chemical peels. On consulting a dermatologist, I find that these scars are permanent."

#### Who's treating you?

However, Dermatologist Dr. Sachith Abraham of Manipal Hospital dismisses reports of such side effects, in both botox as well as chemical peel treatments. "Complications happen when an untrained non-medical practitioner gives the injections or does the chemical treatments. Even in the case of doctors, it is important to be trained in this area to ensure absence of side effects."

According to him, negative symptoms of botox also occur when accidentally injected into the vein. Similarly, in the case of chemical peels, it is important to assess the skin condition and use the correct strength of acid, besides using a good brand. He insists on proper counselling of patients before commencement of treatment.

(The names have been changed to protect identity.)

#### NOT SKIN DEEP

- Common side effects of botox are headaches, nausea, facial pain, drooling, cornea ulcers

- Chemical peels may cause stinging, redness, flaking and peeling of skin

- Dermatologists say complications happen when an untrained non-medical practitioner administers treatments