

Botox Cosmetic: Myths and realities

by Anabel Carró

We live bombarded with images of beautiful young women in the media and see product after product advertised that claim to improve old, wrinkled, tired looking skin. At least one product delivers its promise. Botulinum toxin type A (Botox[®] Cosmetic), the same poison that nearly wiped out the canning industry in the 1950s, dramatically reduces wrinkles while providing youthful looking skin.

Botox Cosmetic, a protein complex produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*, is the same toxin that causes botulism food poisoning. In fact, it is such a deadly poison that it was investigated in World War II as an agent for germ warfare. Despite its origins, however, Botox is the fastest growing cosmetic procedure on the market today.

Botox works by blocking nerve cells that cause muscle contraction, or, in other words, it causes temporary relaxation of the muscles it is injected into. As many wrinkles of the face are caused by overactive muscles, relaxing these muscles can do wonders for one's appearance. These wrinkles that Botox works best on are called "dynamic" wrinkles and

include wrinkles such as crow's feet around the eyes, frown lines between the brows and "worry" lines of the forehead. However, it is a myth that Botox cures all wrinkles. Botox does not, for instance, improve the more common "static" wrinkles resulting from loss of collagen support inside the skin, nor does it improve loose or sagging skin.

Yet Botox is much more than a deadly poison turned wrinkle remover. Botox was first approved in 1989 to treat two eye muscle disorders: uncontrollable blinking (blepharospasm) and misaligned eyes (strabismus). In 2000, the toxin was approved to treat a neurological movement disorder that causes severe neck and shoulder contractions known as cervical dystonia. Doctors later observed that treatment resulted in softening of the vertical frown lines between the eyebrows. By April 2002, the FDA approved Botox for the reduction of frown lines. Today, Botox is used to treat muscle disorders, dystonia, head tremors, migraines, tension headaches, stuttering, incontinence, tennis elbow and excessive sweating.

Another myth surrounding Botox is that because it involves injecting a toxin, it is an

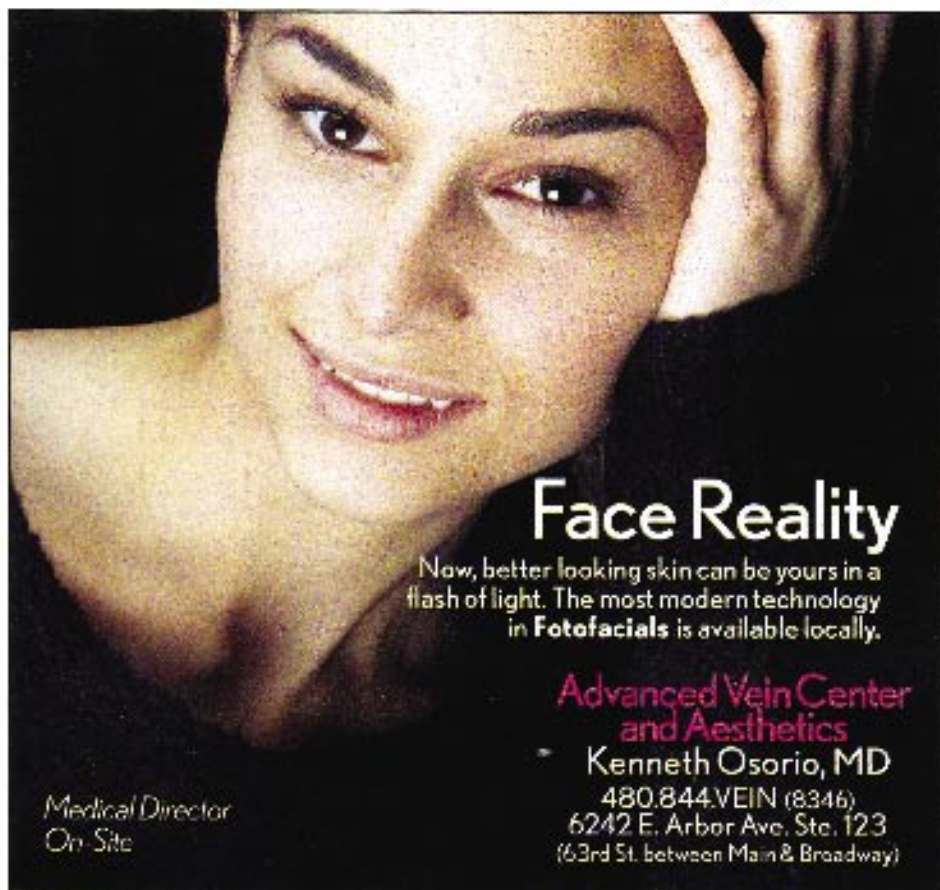
inherently risky procedure. Nothing could be further from the truth. Botox as an injectable is a safe and simple procedure. It is estimated that 1,000 units of Botox would need to be injected into the muscle of a 140-pound human to cause death. The average dose used for a cosmetic procedure is around 20 to 40 units. Therefore, the risk for botulism is practically non-existent.

The fascination with Botox is easy to comprehend. A small amount of diluted Botox is injected with an extremely fine needle into several locations into muscles of the face. Because the needle is fine and only tiny amounts of liquid are used, the pain associated with the injections is truly minimal. Seven days later, people report looking 10 to 15 years younger. Stubborn wrinkles are magically smoothed and the face takes on a more youthful and rested appearance.

Most people receiving Botox suffer no side effects. The most common side effect is a mild headache lasting a few hours. A small number of people will have mild, temporary bruising of the skin at some injection sites, but this normally fades over several days. Drooping of the eyelid is extremely uncommon and this too is temporary and may be partially alleviated with special eye drops. Slight drooping of the upper eyelid occurs in 2 percent of people who have their frown lines injected. A very small percentage of people do not have much effect from Botox. A rare patient may even develop antibodies against Botox and develop resistance to response over time. Usually, however, just the opposite occurs: patients respond more to the same dose as time goes on.

To minimize the possibility of side effects, it is important to have it administered in a medical setting by a qualified medical practitioner capable of handling complications in the event they occur. Botox wears off in about four months and requires re-treatment.

Cost, of course, is always a consideration when considering a cosmetic procedure. Compared to other aesthetic treatment options, Botox is relatively inexpensive. According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, Botox is the least costly facial aesthetic procedure. When considering the amounts of money spent on creams, lotions and gels, which, in truth, do little to retard the aging process, Botox can be seen to be a good way to invest in one's appearance.



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