

Plastic Surgery: Fillers can smooth facial lines

By DR. ALAN MUSKETT
Plastic Surgery

A popular Aerosmith song begins with the phrase "Every time when I look in the mirror, all these lines in my face, getting clearer." Facial lines are compounded by the fact that they create shadows, further accentuating the appearance of a heavier, tired, older face. The life of our face is an inexorable transition from smooth to Shar Pei - the loosening of skin, the sagging of muscle and fat and the ravages of the sun. Facial rejuvenation has many facets, from skin care to face lifting, but one interesting and less-invasive option is that of fillers.

Fillers are injectable substances that fill in lines that are aesthetically undesirable. They are basically camouflage, much like the use of putty to fix a dent on a car (which is not to imply that your face looks like a car wreck).

A common line of concern is the nasolabial fold, the line formed by the junction of the cheek and the upper lip, starting just above the edge of the nose. Another is the labial mental groove, or marionette line, which goes from the corner of the mouth to the chin, which can look like a perpetual frown. Many folks dislike the fine vertical lines on the upper lip, which can give sort of a granny-mouth look. Scars can sometimes be filled, as can about any other crease or crack in the skin.

Fillers used to be primarily collagen, human or animal, so that is why you have heard the term "collagen injections." The newer fillers, of which there is a vast array, are primarily bioengineered versions of natural molecules. This does not include botox, or botulinum toxin, which is not filler but rather an agent that paralyzes muscles and prevents muscle-caused frown wrinkles. I'll discuss botox in another column.

Restylane (hyaluronic acid) is the most widely used dermal (skin) filler.

Hyaluronic acid is a natural human substance that is modified in this filler by the cross-linking of the molecule to stabilize it and make it last longer. It works really

well in lips, fine lines and under the eyes. The "tear trough" is formed by the junction of the lower lid and the cheek, and is the most common cause of the dark circles and bags that we all cherish.

By filling in that trough, caused by the descent of the cheek, the shadows can be much improved. The duration of Restylane is about six months or so, but some of my patients have had better results.

Radiesse is a newer filler composed of calcium hydroxylapatite microspheres in a water-based gel. Initially, the filler plumps up the crease in the face, and then the body's own collagen grows into the areas occupied by the gel carrier.

Because of the durability of the microspheres and the collagen replacement phenomenon, Radiesse has been a longer-acting (18 to 24 months) filler than some of the earlier agents. Because it is a somewhat more bulky and viscous substance than others, its use is restricted to deeper, heavier lines such as the nasolabial folds or marionette lines. It isn't really suitable for lips or fine lines. It does do a great job in the heavier lines, and seems to be holding up well.

Fillers are done in the office with a topical anesthetic or a local block like you get at the dentist. There is usually some redness and maybe some bruising afterward, so maybe don't have it done the day of the big date or parole hearing. Complications can include lumpiness (lumpiness is rarely fatal), mild allergic type reactions and very rarely infection. Nurses and aestheticians can do filler injections in this state. In our office, the doctors do it, probably because surgeons are mildly sadistic and enjoy poking people with needles.

Lip augmentation is done with fillers and can be a very nice thing for people with thin lips or an older-looking mouth. I think many of us have a conception of lip augmentation derived from Hollywood actresses, many whose lips resemble those of bull trout.

If you don't go nuts with the fillers, the improvement can be both very pleasing and subtle. It's a lot like breast implants - some patients and surgeons choose implants the size of water toys, and the result is predictable. Like all things cosmetic, in my way of thinking, safety is first and subtle is second.

Dr. Alan Muskett is a board-certified plastic surgeon at Billings Plastic Surgery. More information is available at www.billingsplasticsurgery.com.