



Plastic Surgery: Skin texture, elasticity, facial volume are all signs of aging

**By Dr. Alan Muskett
Plastic Surgery**

As a baby boomer, I relate to the Aerosmith lyric "Every time when I look in the mirror, all these lines in my face gettin' clearer."

Like many of you, I perpetually see myself as 19-years-old-forever-young. Yet the morning after a couple hours of hoops, I hobble to the bathroom mirror on creaking joints and see reflected all those lines in my face, gettin' clearer.

What is it, exactly, that makes us look older? We can tell when someone looks 16 or 36 or 56, but how do we make those judgments?

There are basic concepts in facial aging. The first of these is the redistribution of volume. The gravitational pull of time causes the descent of facial volume.

The forehead and brows come down, causing a heavier, tired, often more severe appearance. What we often refer to as "cheekbones" are really fat pads, known as malar pads that lend fullness to our cheeks and the areas under the eyes. As these malar pads descend, the eyes take on a hollower, older look.

Look at a 16-year-old girl in contrast to a 36-year-old woman. Even if the woman has no wrinkles, note that her malar pads are lower. The formation of jowls is the result of the descent of skin and fat pads on the side of the face. In general, the movement of facial soft tissue volume from upper to lower is a hallmark of aging. If you really want to see this phenomenon, have someone take a picture of you standing on your head!

Another sign of aging is increased elasticity of skin. As the collagen and elastic fibers in our skin break down, the skin becomes looser and wrinkled. Small lines appear around the eyes and mouth, then deeper lines next to the nose and chin. The deep creases that begin on the side of the nose and go around the lips are called nasolabial folds. These are another telltale sign of aging we unconsciously observe when determining a person's age. The looseness of aging skin is often (and most distressingly) noted in the neck. As surely as a firm, tight neck line is a sign of youth, a "turkey wattle" under the neck is a sign of age.

Skin texture is another clue to age. Smooth skin looks young. Coarser, uneven, pigmented skin looks older.

New methods to younger skin

Given these concepts, what can be done to restore a fresher, more youthful look?

The least invasive methods begin with skin care. Sun protection is by far the most significant thing we can do to prevent facial aging, but for most boomers it is a little late for that.

There is a vast array of skin care and skin tightening agents that do pretty well with fine lines and wrinkles.

Plastic surgeons and dermatologists usually have skin care clinics that assist patients with these options. Chemical peels are a more aggressive way to tighten skin and remove uneven pigmentation. Lasers remove the outer layers of skin and tighten the collagen in the deeper layers. There are several new machines, such as Thermage, that rely on ultrasound-type energy to tighten skin collagen and purport to smooth wrinkled skin. Plastic surgeons I have talked to around the United States report mixed results.

None of these methods remove coarse wrinkles or lift substantial amounts of soft tissue.

'Thread lifts'

You may have heard of "thread lifts." This is a procedure where barbed stitches are introduced through small incisions in the mouth and forehead. The malar (cheek) pads are lifted with these stitches under the skin and secured up to the tough tissues under the skin on the forehead. The operation lifts the cheek area and softens the nasolabial folds (the crease around the nose and mouth). Other thread lifts are designed to lift neck and jowls. These procedures do not remove excess skin or wrinkles, but rather redistribute facial volume upward to restore a more youthful appearance. Again, results with these procedures have been mixed. Patients often have unrealistic expectations of less invasive procedures.

A sobering but generally accurate rule of plastic surgery is that the less invasive the procedure, the less spectacular the result. Television shows, magazines and the Internet are all rife with claims of the "non-invasive" or "mini" procedures. Be careful with that sort of hype, because often patients spend just as much money as they would on a bigger procedure only to get disappointing results.

In my next article, I will discuss the latest concepts in face lifting. The contemporary emphasis is on natural-appearing results with shorter incisions and reduced down time. "Mellow Makeover" can definitely include the face.

Dr. Alan Muskett practices plastic and reconstructive surgery at Billings Plastic Surgery.