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HEALTH & FITNESS

New facial implant can correct gaunt look

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Natural aging and a loss of 25 pounds left Ann Stevens with slightly hollow cheeks.

A face lift wouldn't help, Stevens said, because it would merely pull her skin and make the hollowing more pronounced.

So in March, Stevens opted for "submalar augmentation," a new procedure whereby silicone implants are inserted below the cheekbones. The implants are intended to fill out the depressions caused by a loss of fatty tissue.

"I'm very happy with the results," said Stevens, 50, who lives in Ventura. "I've got a very slim face, and this filled it out."

The implants were developed by Dr. William Binder, a Los Angeles plastic surgeon.

As people age, Binder said, they lose the "padding" below their cheeks. Their skin collapses into the depressions of the midcheek. The submalar implants, he said, act as scaffolding, returning vibrancy to the face.

"It's an alternative for that 35-to-45 age group seeking some sort of procedure to take away the gaunt look," Binder said. "This way you don't have to think about a face lift, which is a big procedure."

Submalar augmentation, on the other hand, is relatively simple. Surgery, done in a doctor's office, takes about 45 minutes. The operation costs \$2,000 to \$3,000, about one-third the price of a face lift.

For patients who do need a complete face lift, Binder and other plastic surgeons said, submalar implants will enhance the result.

"I rarely do a facelift now without some sort of implant," Binder said.

Dr. Genevieve MacDonald, a West Hills plastic surgeon, said she



To fill out hollow cheeks, Joyce Kresge underwent a new procedure, submalar augmentation, in conjunction with a face lift, eyelid lift and nose job. She is shown before and after surgery.

often uses the procedure in conjunction with a face lift.

"It can prolong the life of a face lift," she said.

MacDonald said the implants provide a rounder, more youthful look for people with sunken cheeks.

"You're not going to look like you have a walnut in your cheek," she said. "It's very natural-looking."

Some doctors, however, caution that submalar augmentation won't work for everyone.

"You can get a nice result from it, but it's not a panacea," said Dr. Henry Kawamoto, president of the American Society of Maxillo-Facial Surgeons. "A face lift itself has to do with excess skin and muscles that have sagged, and this doesn't really eradicate that."

For some people, however, the procedure could, indeed, delay the need for a face lift, Kawamoto said.

"Some people, as they age, lose the fat in their cheeks, underneath

the cheekbone," said Kawamoto, an associate clinical professor at UCLA. "On those patients, it could buy them some time by filling out that area. . . . It really depends upon the individual. Not all people lose that."

Joyce Kresge of Mar Vista underwent submalar augmentation while having an eyelid lift last year. Six weeks later, she had a complete face lift and a nose job.

Submalar augmentation "just went along with everything else," said Kresge, 50. "It doesn't really change your appearance. It just enhances your face and gives you some cheekbones. It really looks good. It gave me another 10 years."

Binder said he developed the procedure in response to face-lift requests from young women.

"Thirty-five-year-old women would come in and say, 'I'm starting to look a little gaunt. I think I need a face lift.' I'd look at them with this blank stare and say, 'Are you crazy?' Then I'd kick them out

the door and say, 'Go away. You're too young for a face lift.'"

At the time, Binder said, there wasn't a procedure to help them. The traditional face lift, which treats jowls and loose neck skin, isn't designed to help hollowed cheeks.

So, with help from a NASA space engineer, Binder developed the tiny implants, which come in four sizes.

The implants are inserted through 1-centimeter incisions inside the mouth, at the very top of the gum. Each implant is held in place by a single stitch, which is removed after three days.

The procedure causes minor swelling, according to those who have undergone it. "It's very easy," Stevens said. "It's a bit like having a tooth extracted."

Binder said the procedure has fewer risks than other surgical procedures. But Kawamoto notes there are risks associated with any kind of implant.

"They can shift, they can get infected," he said. "They're right over the dental roots. Theoretically, it could be a threat to the teeth."

Kawamoto said the procedure might be inappropriate for denture wearers.

"The edge of the dentures might rub against the implant," he said.

Binder, however, said the implants pose no threat to people who wear dentures. Also, he said, if any problems do arise, the implants easily can be removed.

"This is the face lift of the '90s," Binder said. "In the '60s, we pulled the skin. In the '70s, we pulled the tissues underlying the skin, which also fell down. Now what we're looking at finally is the underlying bone structure that holds everything up."