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Your Body

Nonsurgical Alternative to Face Lifts

By KATHLEEN DOHENY

Why get a face lift to look younger, reasoned Nana Weinberg, when simple implants to plump up the cheeks might do the job for now. So the 48-year-old Los Angeles architect opted for a new and controversial anti-aging procedure called submalar augmentation.

Offered by a growing number of physicians, cheek implants are quicker and cheaper than traditional face lifts. The small, teardrop-shaped silastic implants are inserted through the mouth during a simple 45-minute office procedure, and the bandages are removed within three days. A face lift operation, on the other hand, can take hours, and swelling can persist for a week or more afterwards. Fees for California face lifts that can cost as much as \$4,200 are three times the implant fees.

The implants work by restoring the facial fullness that wanes with age as underlying fat in the cheekbone area shrinks, says Dr. William A. Binder, a Los Angeles facial, plastic and reconstructive surgeon who just published a report of the new procedure in the Archives of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery. The fat loss usually becomes evident after age 35. "That's the time," says the plastic surgeon, "when patients begin complaining, 'I look old, depressed and sad.'"

Binder sees the implant procedure as an alternative to face lifts for younger patients between the ages of 35 and 50 and as an adjunct for older patients. Weinberg, for instance, followed up the implant with a face lift a few years later.

But some of Binder's colleagues strongly disagree that the implants can ever take the place of traditional face lifts. "I don't believe it's an alternative at all to a face lift because they only fill out the middle of the face," says Dr. Edward O. Terino, an Agoura Hills plastic surgeon who has inserted implants similar to those used by Binder for more than a decade. "But it can be a valuable adjunct to face lift."

Whether implants are adjuncts or alternatives, there can be problems. In Binder's study, 5 of his 78 patients ended up with asymmetrical implants that required adjustment. Two patients got abscesses that were resolved by drainage and antibiotics; three had reduced lip movement that returned to normal within a month; and some had numbness of the upper lip, but sensation returned within three months.

Even when the implants are inserted without a hitch, they can't always solve the "great expectation" problem. Explains Binder with a sigh: "Everyone wants to look like Kim Basinger."