



Face the facts on fillers

HOW SAFE ARE THE LESS INVASIVE COSMETIC PROCEDURES?

Cosmetic fillers have become all the rage in recent years as a tool used for smoothing out the wrinkles and fine lines that are a dead giveaway of age. Injected into the skin, fillers have been considered an easy and less invasive alternative to more traditional nip and tuck procedures of plastic surgery. But how safe are they?

That's a question that the Federal Drug Agency in the United States is now looking to have answered. Data collected by the agency over the past five years suggests patients who are turning to fillers for a quick-fix answer may end up with more than they bargained for – swelling, redness, disfigurement, vision complications and allergic reactions – and serious enough in some cases that patients require follow-up medical treatment.

But the plastic surgeons maintain that these products are generally safe. "Absolutely. They're completely safe," says Dr. DJ Verret, facial plastic surgeon. "What people have to remember, however, is that these are medications, and there can still be some possible reactions as would be the case with any medications."

Indeed the incidence of problematic side effects in the data appears to be rather low. The FDA report presents data on 823 patients who suffered reactions over the past five years. Last year alone, doctors in the United States performed more than 1 million filler injections, which are now second only to Botox among minimally invasive procedures, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

Nonetheless, the concerns are enough to warrant a review of the safety of these products, as well as ways to improve testing, better warn patients about the risks and raise questions about a lack of clinical evidence on darker skinned patients. Off-label use, meaning using them for areas that they were never approved for, is also of concern.

There are many different types of fillers on the market, such as popular hyaluronic acid fillers Restylane and Juvederm, collagen, Radiesse and the more permanent Artefill. Not all will yield the same results or can be used on the same areas. "Knowing when to use which product is very important," says Verret.

Finding a physician who has been properly trained to use fillers is probably the most important step. On top of being qualified to give the actual injection, a physician trained in this area would be better equipped to deal with any possible complications. The report found that in some cases injections were offered in places other than a doctor's office or health clinic and were performed by people who were not trained.

The rise of the medical spa, where a patient may never even see the associated physician, and injections offered as a side practice are a big concern to Verret. "Unfortunately people have become complacent," he says. "There is less of a feeling that this is medication that has to be prescribed accordingly, rather than it being like getting a haircut."

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