

THE AGING FACE

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We all look in the mirror every day and evaluate our looks with either a cursory glance and an approving nod or a more detailed inspection of some of the parts of our face that concern us. Certainly, most of us are looking for signs of aging in the face as we count the birthdays and compare ourselves to our friends and also to faces we see in magazines. Today, there are so many magazines and so many beautiful faces in them that it always makes us feel as if we are falling short in terms of our own appearance.

What causes aging of the face? You can begin with the skin and note epidermal changes that occur in the 40's and progressively from there. Looking at your skin with a magnifying glass you will see small clusters of pigmentation and small brown areas which cannot always be seen with the naked eye. These darker areas caused by some pigmentation make your skin lose the "glow" of youth. The question is, can this be prevented or reversed. Fortunately the answer is yes. We'll come to that later.

Additionally, signs of aging in the face have to do with laxity of the skin. Collagen in a young person is like a spring that is coiled and when stretched tends to snap back to its original shape. As you age, however, everything influences the progressive deterioration of this elastic collagen into what is static collagen, with thinning of the dermis itself. There are many factors that cause this, such as exposure to ultraviolet light, exposure to chemicals, your genetic makeup, poor diet, lack of antioxidants, and multiple other etiologies. This laxity of the skin and excess fat, along with loss of epidermal glow, makes it appear that there are "hanging" areas of the face such as the jowls and neck which is compounded by the darker pigmentation changes that cause more shadowing.

The third component of the aging face is the accumulation of fat in certain areas. For example, in the jawline or jowl area, in the neck, and in the upper and lower eyelids an accumulation of fat tends to cause the aging changes which we see later in life that were not present at a younger age.

In addition to accumulation of fat, there is atrophy of fat. Look at the older person and you will see some hollowing of the mid-cheeks, and this is in contrast to the fullness of the jawline. There is a collection of movable fat in the cheek called the buccal fat pad. With aging, in some people this actually slides down and ends up in the jowl area, which causes more hollow cheeks and larger jowls. In addition, there is an accumulation of fat under the neck, along the jawline separately from the buccal fat pad, and in some people on the cheek area where you see these as small "lumps."

The combination of the accumulation of fat, atrophy of fat, epidermal changes, and skin laxity all contribute in one way or another to the changes of aging. This may be accentuated in some people because of excess exposure to sunshine on their face over the

years which has caused cumulative damage, or it can be from smoking cigarettes or being exposed passively to cigarette smoke. Working in an environment that has exceptionally dry air, such as an airline, can also cause these aging changes and this, in combination with other changes, can create a more marked aging process.

When you walk into a room and look at someone, either from a distance or close up, you can tell just about what their age is by looking at the shadowing of their face, the shape of their face, the shape of their jawline and neck, and the glow of their skin. Of course, we can fool Mother Nature by highlighting the hollow facial areas with makeup, covering the skin with a lighter makeup to give somewhat of a glow, and using eyeliner or other makeup to improve the aging changes around the eyes. However, the combinations of changes that cause aging need to be looked at individually if improvement is to be made.

How do we improve the aging face? There are small preventive procedures and non-invasive treatment techniques available as well as more invasive procedures such as an eye lift, neck lift, or even face lift. Fortunately, with these procedures there is minimal or no pain and pretty quick recovery time so that there is not a lot of time lost from social or work areas.

To prevent aging skin changes, daily sunscreen on the face and hands with even more careful protection when doing outdoor activities would be in order. Retin-A is a derivative of vitamin A and seems to help skin that has undergone some deterioration due to sun damage and aging. In addition, antioxidant creams or lotions such as vitamin C serum, tea-derivative creams or lotions, and phytonutrient or plant-derived skin nutrients can be used. These help prevent production of free radicals in the skin, which damage the skin and cause laxity and wrinkles.

Minimally invasive procedures could include liposuction of the neck and jawline at an early stage so that these never progress to a level which would require surgery, such as a face or neck lift. Adding fat grafting to the lines around the mouth and the hollow in the cheek areas as well as the dark circle areas can make a difference in the aging process as well. Once the fat is removed from the hip area and put into the face, it continues to remain for a long time and can even grow with age to continually improve the result.

What's new in facial rejuvenation at this time? There have been refinements of lasers which improve fine wrinkling, tighten collagen, and improve surface pigmentation. There are newer medications including topical creams and serums which take rejuvenation of skin to an even higher level than the traditional treatment such as Retin-A has done. Minimal small needle liposuction can be done under local anesthesia as a short minor outpatient procedure and can have tremendous effects in terms of prevention of the aging process.

Your face is what you present to the public for the 80 or so years that you will be around. People who are in their 70's and 80's like to look good just as they did 10, 20, or 30 years before. Being careful to maintain your skin and face is an important part of life and will keep you happier when you look in the mirror every day, both now and in the future.