Dermal Fillers Promise to Make Us Look Younger and Fresher. But Only if Used Correctly.

How to avoid “pillow face,” “trout pout” and other pitfalls of our filler-happy age

ml
0.5
1
1.5
2
2.5ml
SINGLE USE ONLY
10ml

New York plastic surgeon David Shafer says he's ordering three or four times more Juvéderm Voluma XC than prepandemic in 2019 and injecting on average 100 to 150 syringes a week.

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By Fiorella Valdesolo

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"Trout pout" is a term used to describe a common effect of too much dermal filler: when, because of overzealous injections, one's lips are so inflated they begin to curl outwards. The other frequently cited filler fail occurs when cheeks become bloated and broaden, something comedian Amy Schumer called out on her Instagram a few months back: After test-driving filler, Schumer said she looked like the pointy-cheeked Disney villain Maleficent. According to the Aesthetic Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS), among nonsurgical procedures performed by board-certified plastic surgeons in the U.S., fillers are second in popularity only to Botox. Despite the name recognition, though, dermatologists say there is still plenty of confusion about what fillers should and shouldn't be used for.

The FDA describes dermal fillers as gel-like substances that are injected under the skin to increase fullness or lessen the appearance of lines. Ingredients often include hyaluronic acid, calcium hydroxylapatite and poly-l-lactic acid. "Filler is really designed to recreate the natural fat and bone support that we had on ourselves five or 10 years ago," says New York dermatologist Robert Anolik. Among the FDA-approved fillers, doctors often single out hyaluronic acid–based ones like Juvéderm Voluma XC as especially popular. Patients at the Brooklyn office of oculofacial plastic surgeon Chaneve Jeanniton call it "fancy jelly," and New York plastic surgeon David Shafer says he's ordering three or four times more Voluma than prepandemic in 2019 and injecting on average 100 to 150 syringes a week.

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>
> — Dermatologist Shereene Idriss

Hyaluronic acid, commonly used as a filler base, is also a naturally occurring substance in the body. New York dermatologic surgeon Dendy Engelman says, "Since hyaluronic acid is a familiar substance to our bodies, it minimizes the risk of an allergic reaction." And unlike fillers formulated with other ingredients, it can be reversed with the injection of a dissolving enzyme called hyaluronidase. That's what Schumer reportedly did when she wasn't into her Maleficent cheekbones.

Fillers like Sculptra and Radiesse are biostimulatory, which means that they boost collagen production over time. According to Engelman, they are also heavier, and their effects tend to last longer than hyaluronic acid fillers, one to two years as opposed to six months to a year. "While this is a good thing for patients who are happy with their results, it also means that any mistakes can be very difficult to correct and take a long time to go away," Engelman adds.

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When wielded correctly and conservatively by a doctor or experienced injector, filler can smooth and fill out areas of the face that are prone to hollowing as we age. "You can restore volume anywhere it has been lost as long as you respect the anatomical considerations of the face," says Jeanniton, who, as an oculofacial surgeon, says that under-eye filler is her most requested procedure. Ideal candidates have a tear trough that is causing dark shadows or making them look tired, but little or no under-eye bags. Jeanniton says the procedure takes 10 minutes, leads to a few days of minor swelling and gives results that last a year.

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>
> — Dermatologist Robert Anolik

Shereene Idriss, a New York dermatologist, has had success mitigating some patient’s under-eye bags by using filler along the temple and hairline, which gives a subtle lift to the face. Her approach when meeting with new patients considering filler is to watch their faces as they’re speaking. Movement casts a spotlight on how each face is aging and where it’s losing volume.

Anolik often uses filler to give a sense of lift and fullness, using it to replace diminishing fat pad and bone support around the chin and jawline. “Filler on the nose can be really helpful to create a more linear bridge,” adds Anolik. Newer techniques involve injecting into areas that cause wrinkles rather than into the wrinkles themselves, says Engelman. For example, injecting below the ear where the jaw makes a 90 degree angle can help lessen lower-face jowls and sagging.

While filler can create a lifted effect, it can’t actually lift a face that is significantly sagging. “Injecting an area that already has too much sagging causes the sagginess to be exacerbated, creating a ‘heavy’ look,” says Engelman. It can create a gravitational drag on the skin. For serious laxity, Jeanniton steers patients away from filler. “The likelihood that it can meaningfully overcome the effects of gravity and time on these multiple tissue layers isn’t realistic,” she adds. New York plastic surgeon Adam Kolker says that skin that’s been stretched further by filler can make any future surgical intervention more arduous and also impact the healing process. “I think people have to understand that if you rely entirely on filler with the hope of avoiding the need for a face-lift and you keep filling to lift, you’re absolutely going to get wider and poofier and bloated and look completely unusual,” says Anolik.

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> — Dermatologic surgeon Dendy Engelman

“Pillow face” is how Engelman describes the overstuffed look whereby cheeks are so inflated that the eyes tend to look shrunken. “In recent years, with the advent of social media and filters, people are trying to chase proportions that are not natural to their bone structure,” says Idriss. Anolik says the biggest cause of patients looking artificial has to do with who’s handling that needle and the extent of their knowledge on anatomy. “The actual act of putting a needle in the skin and pressing the syringe is not a big deal,” says Anolik, “but the ramification in terms of cosmetic and medical consequences can be serious.”

One common mistake is trying to eliminate wrinkles and creases entirely. “Even preschoolers have a nasolabial fold,” says Anolik, referring to the smile lines on either side of the mouth. Filler can be used to soften the appearance of that fold, which becomes more pronounced with age, but eliminating it entirely isn’t natural. Another misstep, says Engelman, is refilling too soon. “The effects of filler do fade over time, but re-injecting patients too early can cause the face to look overfilled,” says Engelman. Jeanniton says she spends a significant amount of time in her practice simply fixing others’ mistakes, particularly the “trout pout” mouth and the eyes, where filler can cause lumps and contour irregularities.

Filler anywhere, and particularly around the eye, is not without risks, including the occasional allergic reaction. Overzealous injections can lead to poor cosmetic results, but incorrect injections can have medical repercussions, potentially damaging blood vessels and causing rare complications that impact the eyes and vision.

Among alternatives is Sofwave, a skin-tightening device that uses ultrasound energy, which, Jeanniton says, is particularly effective for the lower face and neck. Idriss frequently uses Ultherapy, another ultrasound treatment, especially on her fiftysomething patients. And she occasionally employs a Fraxel laser, which works without causing physical damage to the skin, or radio frequency treatments applied via microneedling, which can help stimulate collagen and elastin.

For some the hesitation around fillers may not be about needles, but about honoring the passage of time. On the first season of *And Just Like That,* Sarah Jessica Parker’s character visited a plastic surgeon’s office and had the option to erase the last 15 years. She passed.

Corrections & Amplifications

Dr. David Shafer is a plastic surgeon in New York. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said he is a dermatologist. (Corrected on May 4.)

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