

Having a little work done?

8 surprising things about med spas that you should know



SHOTS IN THE DARK Ordering a Botox treatment to go along with that spa facial might be riskier than you think.

the results. The way to avoid a bad experience is to find a spa with skilled doctors who can advise you about safe treatments. Here are eight things you need to know before you sign up for even minor cosmetic procedures.

1 ANY KIND OF DOCTOR CAN OPEN A MED SPA.

Med-spa trade groups recommend, and some states require, that facilities be supervised by a physician. But in some facilities the doctor on the letterhead is absent while nurses or even nonmedical staff perform cosmetic procedures. And when a doctor is present, he could just as easily be a pediatrician as a dermatologist. “So many doctors are disenchanted with the current medical system. They think that they can make a quick buck in the med-spa arena,” says Goldman. But do you really want a podiatrist injecting paralyzing toxins into the muscles of your face? Amy Newburger, M.D., a dermatologist at St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York City says it’s important to find a doctor with “a real understanding of the anatomy, structure, and function of skin, particularly facial skin.”

What you can do Make sure the supervising physician is on site and specializes in either dermatology or plastic surgery.

2 BOTOX ISN’T RISK-FREE. The FDA is currently reviewing the safety of Botox and other related drugs after some reports of respiratory failures and deaths. The most serious of these

With med spas popping up in seemingly every town, it’s almost as easy to get a Botox injection as it is a mani-pedi. The market for minor cosmetic procedures, including laser hair removal and wrinkle filling, is up 750 percent in the past decade, according to the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. And everyone from podiatrists to hairdressers is cashing in. But it’s easy to forget that many of these treatments are still *medical* procedures. Put a laser or needle in the hands of someone without the right training, and things can get ugly fast.

“I have patients coming to me virtually every day regarding a complication, scar, or other adverse event as a result of a procedure delivered by nonmedical personnel in a medical spa without physician supervision,” says Mitchel Goldman, M.D., clinical professor of dermatology at the University of

California, San Diego. Many other doctors told us the same thing. A 2007 survey conducted by the American Society for Dermatological Surgery found that more than half of polled physicians reported an increase in treating patients with complications as a result of procedures performed by someone other than a doctor in the previous two years.

The problem is that the industry is growing too fast for regulators to keep up, so many med spas operate with little or no oversight. Depending on where you live, the spa may not even be required to be supervised by a physician or to employ medically trained staff. What’s even more scary is that not all advertised procedures are safety-tested or approved by the Food and Drug Administration. And some treatments have been approved despite the risk of complications.

Of course, many people who have a little work done are pleased with

cases involved unapproved uses of the drugs in children (for severe muscle spasms, for example), but there have also been some reports involving adults who probably got the shots for FDA-approved cosmetic purposes. And odds are there are unreported cases too. “The process for reporting adverse events is so time-consuming and cumbersome,” says Newburger, who has participated on several FDA-approval panels. “It’s no wonder that just 1 to 10 percent of adverse reactions are ever turned in.” Botox, Botox Cosmetic, and Myobloc have low doses of botulinum toxin, a powerful natural poison that relaxes overactive muscles. Doctors have

long known that in people who have pre-existing neuromuscular disorders, the shots, in large doses, can trigger effects far from the injection site, including difficulty swallowing and breathing. The new reports suggest that those effects may occur in others too. More common problems that can happen with Botox, especially in the hands of an inexperienced person, include drooping eyelids, a flattened lower lip, a sagging mouth, or even a speech impediment, says Newburger. **What you can do** Consider the potential risks of Botox—and have it injected only by a physician with plenty of experience. “I’m telling my patients about new findings,”

says Macrene Alexiades-Armenakas, M.D., “and particularly discouraging my younger patients—those in their 20s and 30s—from using it, as any theoretical side effects would likely worsen the longer the drug is used.”

3 SOME WRINKLE FILLERS CAN DAMAGE YOUR SKIN. Injectables with hyaluronic acid, such as Juvéderm Ultra, Perlane, or Restylane, and collagen-based injectables like CosmoDerm and Zyderm, last several months and are generally safe. A recent study suggests that at least one form of hyaluronic acid may even spur collagen production, which can further improve skin’s

Before you go, ask these questions

Med spas operate largely without government or professional oversight in many states, and it can be difficult to make an educated, safe choice. That means it’s up to you to ask the tough questions. Here are the top 10.

Does a physician oversee the facility, and is he or she on site? “If not, run, don’t walk, away,” says Mitchel Goldman, M.D. Anything more invasive than a light chemical peel (laser treatments, and injectables, for example) should be overseen by a specialist.

What are the physician’s credentials? Your best bet is a board-certified dermatologist or plastic surgeon. Beware of “cosmetic medicine physicians” who may lack training and experience. You can check if a doctor is board-certified at www.abms.org.

Will I meet with a doctor before the procedure? A doctor should review your medical history, examine you, and help you weigh treatment options.

Who will perform the procedure? In some states, it’s legal for a nurse or physician’s assistant to do some minor procedures. So be sure to ask about the staff’s training and experience, and make sure they are supervised by a physician. Don’t trust your skin to nonmedical personnel.

Does the facility use FDA-approved products? Even if the answer is yes, keep in mind that “there have been cases of bootleg or diluted Botox,” says Richard D’Amico, M.D. “Patients should ask to see the unopened package.”

What results should I expect? The doctor should provide realistic before-and-after photos. Also, seek out people who’ve had the same procedure.

What are the risks? Usually, they’re minor and temporary—irritation, swelling, residual pain—but all invasive procedures carry some risk of more serious problems such as burns or scarring. Also, ask if a physician will be available to follow up in case of complications.

How many visits will it take? It could take several for procedures such as laser hair removal or vein therapy.

How long will the effects last? You may be willing to spend more on a hyaluronic acid wrinkle filler such as Restylane or Juvéderm knowing that it will likely last longer than a collagen-based filler like Zyplast or CosmoDerm.

What is the total cost? Don’t go by the often-misleading prices quoted in ads. Ask for the total price up front, including physician’s fees, drug costs, and follow-up visits.

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appearance. Semipermanent fillers, which can last up to two years, are another story. The tiny particles that give them staying power can irritate the skin, migrate, or break, causing swelling, bumps, and scarring. And FDA approval can be based on small, short-term studies. An example is ArteFill, the longest-lasting of these fillers, which the FDA approved based largely on one clinical trial of 251 subjects followed after treatment for no more than a year. The panel wasn't allowed to consider many reports of complications caused by a previous version of the product used in Europe. Some experts also have raised concerns about the long-term aesthetic outcome and potential side effects of the filler, which one critic calls "injectable Plexiglas."

And while ArteFill is approved only for nasolabial folds, the creases that extend from either side of the nose to the corners of the mouth, some doctors could inject it elsewhere, such as around the lips, which might cause scarring and other complications. This type of off-label use is legal, but it's not always a good idea.

Newburger, a member of the FDA panel that approved the filler Sculptra for facial wasting in HIV-positive patients, was disturbed when she heard physicians representing the manufacturer endorse the product as a general-purpose wrinkle filler. "I felt betrayed, quite frankly," says Newburger. "We fast-tracked the approval of this product on a compassionate basis, assuming that it would be controlled and dispensed only to a certain population." The safety of the drug in people with normal immune systems is unknown.

What you can do Newburger recommends avoiding semipermanent fillers until more safety testing is done. "In this case, the latest is not necessarily the greatest," says

Newburger. "A product should be used by a lot of other people for a long time before you should consider it safe enough for yourself."

4 BROWN SKIN CAN EASILY BE SCARRED BY LASERS. Brown skin is more prone to scarring, loss of pigment, and dark marks. And brown skin isn't necessarily dark. "You may not realize it, but if you have Asian, Hispanic, Mediterranean, African-American, Native American, or Middle Eastern ancestry, among



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others, you likely have brown skin," says Susan Taylor, M.D., director of the Skin of Color Center at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York City. One way to tell if you have such skin is if things such as light burns tend to leave dark marks.

What you can do Ask if the practitioner has the experience and equipment to meet your special needs. New color-blind machines (long-pulsed Nd:YAG or diode lasers) lessen the risk of burns. Taylor recommends patch tests before full treatments.

5 DISCOUNT LASER TREATMENTS MAY BE NO BARGAIN. For one thing, they may be done with older equipment. "With some of the older machines, it may take 10 treatments instead of three to achieve near-permanent hair removal," says Goldman. "Or they may not be able to safely handle dark skin or light hair." He adds, "Many people walk in thinking that there is one laser machine that does everything." Truth

is, each type of procedure—removing hair, treating sun-damaged skin, or zapping spider veins—requires special equipment and training. Goldman's office has 32 laser machines, three just for hair removal. Using the wrong machine or the wrong setting can cause severe burns and scarring.

What you can do Shop by quality, not price, and find a doctor with specific laser expertise who can tell you the pros and cons of each machine. "Think about it—who do you want pointing a powerful laser at you?" asks Alexiades-Armenakas. "You don't want it to be someone who's just taken a weekend class."

6 COSMETIC WORK COULD MAKE CANCER HARD TO SPOT.

Treatments can smooth skin, but that's not a good thing if they camouflage telltale lesions. "Laser treatments could hide a melanoma," says Goldman. "By the time the lesion becomes apparent, the cancer may have spread."

What you can do Ask a doctor to check your skin before it's zapped, peeled, or plumped, particularly if you have moles. "Patients should always be seen by a supervising physician to discuss treatment options before undergoing any cosmetic procedures," says Richard D'Amico, M.D., president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons and assistant clinical professor of surgery at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York City.

7 ADVERTISED PROCEDURES MAY NOT BE SAFETY-TESTED OR FDA-APPROVED. One example of a heavily advertised procedure that may

not have been adequately tested is mesotherapy, also called lipolysis, which involves injections—often of non-FDA-approved drugs—that supposedly dissolve fat.

What you can do Wait for results of lipolysis clinical trials. And before getting any cosmetic treatment, ask if it's FDA-approved. "If not," says D'Amico, "that's a big red light." Even then, don't agree to a treatment until you know what it's approved for and under what conditions. And if your doctor is using the drug for an unapproved purpose, ask why, and what experience he or she has using it for that purpose. You can find out more about approved uses, side effects, and potential warnings by searching for the drug or procedure at the FDA's Web site, www.fda.gov.

8 MED-SPA NUMBING CREAMS CAN BE LETHAL.

In 2006, the FDA issued an advisory after two young women died from complications related to an anesthetic cream they used on their legs before laser hair removal. In addition to death, numbing creams can bring on irregular heartbeats, slowed breathing, seizures, and coma if used incorrectly. Anesthetic cream is widely used but can cause problems if you use too much, apply it to irritated skin, leave it on too long, or if you overheat the treated area by wrapping it or exercising, for example. Another serious risk: creams used by med spas that are not FDA approved but instead custom-made in a pharmacy. Some of these creams may be more potent than FDA-approved products.

What you can do Request an FDA-approved cream. And ask to have a medical professional apply it. Or at least have one supervise you while you're applying it.



QUICK CONSULT

with Amy E. Newburger, M.D., a dermatologist at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York City and author of "Looking Good at Any Age" (Doubleday, 1999).

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY THINNING HAIR?

The major causes of hair loss are nutritional deficiency, hormonal imbalance, or hypersensitivity, age, and stress. If you've dealt with the nutrition and hormonal problems, and that's not working, here are a few other options worth considering.

FDA-APPROVED TREATMENTS

Topical minoxidil (Rogaine) You can buy it over the counter in 2 percent formulas for men and women, and 5 percent formulas for men only. (Another hair-loss remedy, finasteride, which is prescribed under the brand name Propecia, is also approved but only for men; it can cause birth defects if a pregnant woman is exposed to it.) A new foam formulation is somewhat easier to apply. Hair growth is generally noticeable after six months. If your hair loss is hormone- or age-related, you have to keep using it. If short-term stress is the problem, you can stop using minoxidil after hair regrows.

HairMax Laser Comb This very costly red-light-laser device is sold over the counter. You use it three times a week for 15 minutes. Studies have shown that the HairMax Laser Comb increases hair density when used for six months, but it appears to work better for men than women. In some of my patients who have used it, I see a generally modest but noticeable improvement within about four to six months.

OFF-LABEL PRODUCTS These are drugs approved for other medical purposes that may help with hair loss. If you'd like to try them, find a doctor who has experience using them off-label for hair regrowth.

Spirolactone (Aldactone) It's a blood-pressure drug that at high doses can regrow hair. But you must be monitored for side effects. It's not recommended for men, because it can have feminizing effects, or for pregnant women, because it may cause birth defects.

Tretinoin (Retin-A) This drug was shown in studies to produce a modest increase in hair growth but caused irritation of the scalp, so it's generally only used in small amounts combined with Rogaine.

What about those hair-growth remedies advertised online? Lots of them are costly combinations of vitamins, minerals, and botanical extracts. I can't find any studies that back their often outrageous claims, and the FDA has determined that the safety and efficacy data on topical vitamins and hormones for increasing hair growth are not established. One exception is saw palmetto extract, but because of uneven manufacturing standards, among other reasons, you can never know if you're getting the right dose. The FDA states on its Web site that any product promoted as a "hair grower" or for hair-loss prevention is a new drug, and without an approved new-drug application, it's not what it might seem. So don't let the ads trick you into wasting your money!