

TimeOut

Pretty poison

Bacterium puts wrinkles to rest (temporarily)

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IF YOU WANT to take part in the trendiest way to look young again, call your nearest dermatologist or plastic surgeon. Stroll down to his or her upscale office.

And have your face injected with poison.

Botulinum toxin type A, to be exact. Or you can just ask for Botox.

If ingested in large amounts, of course, you would most likely vomit, suffer from diarrhea and then die of botulism. But if trace amounts are injected above the eyebrows just so, you'll see your crow's feet, frown lines and brow furrows vanish, virtually overnight.

"It sounds hideous, but the results are wonderful," says Loretta Cass, a San Jose saleswoman who has used Botox several times.

Cass is just one of the tens of thousands of Americans who have opted to undergo the five-minute procedure, which temporarily paralyzes the fa-

cial muscles that cause worry lines.

Even though the Food and Drug Administration has not specifically approved the use of Botox for cosmetic procedures, magazines and television shows alike are promoting its potential as a wrinkle reducer. Some cosmetic surgeons recount how it now makes up a bulk of their practice. And Allergan, the Irvine manufacturer of Botox, discloses that sales of the product jumped from \$25.3 million in 1993 to \$90.1 million in 1997.

"Everybody's talking about it," says Dr. Seth Matarasso, a private-practice dermatologist in San Francisco. "It's coming out of the closet, so to speak."

Because the process is quick, relatively painless and requires no anesthesia, first-time customers tend to quickly fall in love with it, Matarasso says, even though the results last only an average of three to six months.

"Invariably they become what I call 'Botox junkies' — addicted to the product," he says.

Although the botulinum toxin is

legal, it is considered much deadlier than truly addictive and illicit substances such as heroin or crack cocaine. In fact, the bacterium is thought to be the most poisonous material on earth.

That the toxin can heal as well as harm is a paradox that's not lost on doctors. The drug has been proven to be safe and effective since it hit the market nearly a decade ago.

Botox patients don't drop dead because it's a purified form of the bacteria — sold in trace amounts — that is injected rather than ingested, explains Dr. Alan Matarasso, a New York plastic surgeon and editor of the *Aesthetic Surgery Journal* who is also Dr. Seth Matarasso's brother.

There simply is no risk of developing botulism, he says.

"You'd have to use 50 or more bottles. We don't even use a tenth of a bottle on a patient."

Botox is not without minor, temporary side effects, however. Slight bruising and eyelid drooping have been reported by some patients. And

others have complained of daylo headaches.

But in 1989, the FDA gave makers of Botox its blessing to use the product to treat eye spasms and a crossing of the eyes. If injected properly, Botox will stop muscles from contracting involuntarily for months at a time.

It has been deemed a miracle drug by people whose spasms are so severe they otherwise are not able to keep their eyes open for even short lengths of time. But one eye patient noticed the drug also gave her a beautiful, untroubled expression, a countenance virtually free of worry lines and other wrinkles. She asked her ophthalmologist, Dr. Jean Carruthers, to inject her more often.

Carruthers, now a professor at the University of British Columbia, teamed up with her husband, a dermatologist, to study the wrinkle-reducing effects of Botox. After measuring the results on 30 patients, the

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