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The Problem With The Term “Anti-Aging” – According to Experts

Shani Darden and Dr. Steven Williams Tell Essence What “Anti-Aging” Means For An Industry That Can’t Turn Back the Hands of Time.

India Espy Jones | February 2, 2024



The term “anti-aging” is a buzz word in beauty. From skincare brands promising “Botox in a bottle” serums to “nonsurgical facelift” tools, having younger, firmer and plumper skin is the beauty standard. In medical terms, “anti-aging means procedures or medications designed to reverse or prevent the physical, mental, and psychological characteristics associated with getting older,” board-certified plastic and reconstructive surgeon and president of the ASPS, [Dr. Steven Williams](#) tells ESSENCE.

Last year, Harvard Medical School scientists found a “chemical cocktail” to reverse the aging process via a single pill. According to their findings, the whole-body rejuvenation drug not only reduced age-related diseases and injuries, but the very appearance of growing older (like wrinkles, gray hair, and muscular aging) in less than one week. “Since the dawn of time humans have done everything they can to prevent death,” Williams says. “Getting older is an acknowledgment that that fight is futile.” So, “anti-aging” has been the magic potion in the beauty industry to appear and feel younger.

Profiting off of the desire to avoid aging, the aesthetics industry built a global \$71.6 billion dollar anti-aging market full of retinoids, sunscreen, and tweakments to prevent and treat aging. “It’s

easy to get fooled and it's easy to believe promises that aren't true from manufacturers, social media, and those around you," Williams says. Which is why "the term 'anti-aging' can be a little misleading," Celebrity Esthetician, Shani Darden adds. Pinning the prefix "anti-" onto a term that defines our existence may do more harm than good, especially if you don't know how to find the beauty in an aging appearance— including fine lines, wrinkles, and sagging. "While we can take the proper steps to take care of our skin and minimize certain signs of aging, aging is a natural and inevitable process," Darden says.

But the anti-aging craze doesn't just target mature skin. This year, the rise in "Sephora tweens" and demand for active drugstore serums marked Gen Z and Gen Alpha as the latest recipients of preventative beauty trends to preserve their appearance. "There's been a huge recent boom in interest in skincare across much younger generations and I think it's great to form good skincare habits early on," Darden says, and build age-appropriate appearance expectations. "That being said, there are many ingredients such as retinol and more that aren't necessary for extremely young skin," with the case-by-case use for chronic acne.

In Williams's plastic surgery practice, however, his patients "generally don't use the term 'anti-aging'" at all. Instead, they directly ask for physical surgeries or medications to tweak the appearance of their body and face. He noted younger people tend to request liposuction, body contouring, and breast augmentation to sculpt their body, while older patients lean towards anti-aging facelifts, blepharoplasty, and Botox to target sagging and wrinkles.

But despite age-reversal pills and retinol-rich skincare routines, "the term 'anti-aging' may create unrealistic expectations, fostering a notion that we can reverse the aging process [all together]," Darden says, leading to frustration, disappointment, empty wallets (and promises). "It's no secret that as we get older, there is a subtle negative pressure that affects all aspects of our lives," Williams adds, with women' bearing the pressure to look younger. (Think: today's "girlcore" beauty trends.)

Which is why it is important to shift the narrative of trying to reverse or "fix" our age, and instead, improving the health of our skin and body. "It's important to allow people to pursue their personal [aesthetic] goals, but it should be with the overall realization that getting older is a good thing, and the alternative is generally undesired," Williams says. After all, "aging is a natural part of life and it is a privilege to get older," Darden ends. "I encourage promoting healthy skin at every age, rather than solely trying to reverse the clock."

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