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Corrective vs. Preventive Treatments: How To Choose Anti-Aging Skin Care

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Botox can actually be preventive and/or corrective.

If you're interested in diminishing the look of wrinkles, acne scars, sun spots or other skin features that develop with age, you may be considering expensive skin care products or treatments. But before you shell out hundreds or even thousands of dollars on cosmetic procedures, it's important to understand which ones can actually make a corrective impact and which ones can't.

Certain common beauty treatments, including the use of Botox and topical SPF products, may be most effective when used preventively, before the skin changes. Meanwhile, other remedies, like fillers and chemical peels, are quite effective at reversing the appearance of aging in a corrective manner. To help you better understand the best treatment for your particular skin concern, we consulted five dermatologists and plastic surgeons for their expert advice.

What's the difference between preventive and corrective skin care?

Most beauty treatments fall into one of two categories — preventive or corrective — and many can be used for both.

“Preventative treatments improve and strengthen the skin to keep the aging process at bay, while corrective treatments reverse aging or damage to the skin,” said Dr. Stacey Tull, a surgeon and cosmetic dermatology specialist in Missouri who is the owner and founder of St. Charles County Dermatologic Surgery.

If your skin is in good health, it's imperative to use preventive skin care treatments to help keep it that way. Preventive treatments "can actually help maintain our skin's health and delay the onset signs of aging, such as fine lines and wrinkles," explained **Dr. Kimberly Lee**, a facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon in Beverly Hills, California.

Meanwhile, "corrective treatments ameliorate brown spots, wrinkles, scars, acne scars [and] broken blood vessels," added Dr. Anna Guanche, a board-certified dermatologist practicing in Beverly Hills and Calabasas, California.

The best preventive skin care treatment is probably already in your medicine cabinet.

Above all else, the skin experts we consulted were insistent that the most effective and essential preventive beauty treatment is the use of an SPF product.

"The best prevention, skin care-wise, is consistent use of SPF 30 or higher," Guanche said. Beyond helping to prevent harmful skin cancer, daily use of an SPF product can also have impactful cosmetic benefits. Guanche said that "UV [ultraviolet] exposure is the main cause of photoaging," which results in visible effects on the skin such as wrinkles, loss of skin tone, uneven skin texture, and pigmentation changes such as age spots.

"If you [don't use] sunscreen regularly, all of the other skin care products [you use] will not make up for the damage that happens over the years," added Dr. Linda Lee, a facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon in Boston.

What are other topical skin care products with preventive benefits?

Beyond sunscreen, "retinoids or vitamin A-based products are also great preventive ingredients. They are used to prevent mild fine lines, wrinkles, acne and dark spots," noted Dr. Marina Peredo, a board-certified dermatologist and the owner of Skinfluence in New York City. "Moisturizers that contain vitamin C and retinol are great at keeping skin plump and hydrated throughout the day to prevent skin dryness."

Although "much of what determines sagging skin is genetics and age," Tull advised that "using SPF and retinoids from an early age can help to prevent and postpone the onset of sagging skin."

Furthermore, "using retinol over years has been proven on skin biopsies to have increased collagen compared to not using it," Linda Lee said. (Increased collagen helps boost the skin's elasticity.)

"Most people do not see any immediate change, and we consider this the slow burn of skin care," she added. "Drastic results don't come overnight, [but] the long-term results are definitely worth the investment."

Botox has both preventive and corrective benefits.

One treatment that can help achieve results before and after wrinkles set in is Botox.

“When Botox is used preventatively, the main purpose is to prevent wrinkles and fine lines forming around the forehead and eyes and the frown line. It is usually used on younger patients,” Peredo said. “Correctively, Botox is effective in reducing the appearance of already-formed deeper lines and wrinkles like crow’s-feet, frown lines and forehead wrinkles. In addition, we can use Botox correctively to slim the jawline [and correct] neck creepiness, facial asymmetry and excessive sweating.”

Still, there are limitations. “There is a point that is ‘too late’ for Botox,” Linda Lee noted. “Once wrinkles are set in the skin, it can be too late for Botox to make any significant difference. The best point to start Botox is when you have minor wrinkles with movement, and they are just starting to become deeper — this is the perfect time for preventative Botox treatment.”

On the other hand, the trend of starting Botox younger may also have a negative impact. “People can develop immunity to Botox, so you should not start too early,” Linda Lee said. “You should avoid touching up too frequently. Ideally you start when you are developing wrinkles which are bothersome to you, and you do the lowest dose that works for you. You should space treatments to be at least three months apart.”

Some topical skin care treatments can also have corrective benefits.

If you’re already experiencing changes in your skin and would like to diminish their appearance, there are a number of things you can try that don’t involve needles or scalpels. Kimberly Lee recommended “retinoids that promote and accelerate cell turnover,” as well as “alpha hydroxy acids and beta hydroxy acids, which exfoliate the skin and unclog pores and improve skin texture.” Furthermore, azelaic acid and hydroquinone can fade hyperpigmentation, while kojic acid can lighten dark spots.

Glycolic acids can also work to reduce fine lines as well as brighten dull skin, Guanche added.

Chemical peels — which involve a chemical solution that is applied to the skin to remove the top layers — “are more commonly used as corrective treatments to address issues like sun damage, fine lines, wrinkles, acne scars and uneven pigmentation,” Peredo said. However, they can also be done preventively “to promote skin renewal and reduce signs of aging,” Peredo noted.

Here are the in-office procedures that offer the best corrective results.

Certain skin treatments should only be used after unwanted effects have set in. “Fillers are exclusively corrective for the effect that gravity has on aging, such as the cheeks, jowls, nasolabial folds and lip atrophy,” Tull noted. They help restore volume loss, smooth the appearance of wrinkles, and fill hollow areas.

Botox can also be corrective for dynamic fine lines, but if the lines are deeper in the skin, “filler is a better corrective treatment” and can be done in tandem with Botox, Linda Lee explained, “so one prevents and the other corrects.”

Laser skin resurfacing — a facial rejuvenation procedure that uses a laser to improve the skin’s appearance or treat blemishes — promotes collagen production. “This is often used as a corrective treatment for moderate to severe skin concerns including wrinkles, sun damage, age spots, and acne scars,” Peredo said.

Microdermabrasion, which works by “removing the most superficial skin layers to reveal smoother, healthier skin ... can be used to correct various skin concerns, including acne scars, fine lines and uneven skin tone,” Peredo added, saying that it can also be used preventively “to maintain skin health and improve texture by gently exfoliating the outer layer of the epidermis.”

For those experiencing skin sagging, thread lifting — a procedure that uses temporary sutures to produce a subtle but visible “lift” in the skin — “is the most effective way to address sagging skin nonsurgically,” Tull said. The effects will last approximately one to three years. However, it may come as no surprise that the most effective method to address skin sagging in the face involves a scalpel. “The gold standard is with surgical procedures such as face and neck lifts,” Tull said.

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