

Women's Health

Meet The New Aging Experts. How Functional Medicine Doctors Are Changing Aesthetics.

Elise Minton Tabin | January 14, 2026



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Mention the words *Botox* or *filler* and the image that comes to mind for many is cartoonish duck lips; a frozen, expressionless face; or puffed-up pillow cheeks—the artificial appearance of youth. It's why some people cringe at the very idea of surrendering their face to a cosmetic dermatologist. It's 2026. No one wants to look overdone.

But those results may (hopefully) be a thing of the past. Functional medicine doctors are bringing their integrative approach to noninvasive aesthetics, harnessing technology that uses a patient's own biological material (mostly their blood) and other naturally derived molecules for a softer, more subtle look.

Yes, many of these docs are still using muscle-relaxing injections like botulinum toxin and hyaluronic acid filler—after all, they're effective in the right hands—but the focus is on addressing the root causes of skin aging rather than just masking it with surface-level fixes. Instead of starting with an assessment of a person's visual appearance, hyper-focusing on every little line and wrinkle, these practitioners use their patients' full medical history to guide treatment. "Comprehensive lab work, an analysis of symptoms, and other diagnostic tools allow us to create a plan," says Raheleh Sarbaziha, MD, an integrative aesthetic physician based in Beverly Hills.

That plan often includes next-generation therapies like PRP (the famed "vampire facial"), PRF, NAD+, exosomes, and peptides, treatments being labeled "regenerative aesthetics" for how they

stimulate your body's own youth-boosting ability. Some may be familiar to you; others may sound completely foreign. Either way, we've got intel on all of these advancements from the physicians leading the charge. Welcome to the era of undetectable aesthetics.

A fresh POV on aesthetics

For the uninitiated, functional medicine, which has been around for decades, is characterized by its merging of traditional Western medical practices with lifestyle recommendations focused on nutrition, environment, and daily habits. It's used to treat everything from low energy and brain fog to anxiety, depression, autoimmune disorders such as lupus, and seasonal allergies. The goal is to address what's happening below the surface, rather than focusing solely on symptoms.

That philosophy now extends to the health and vitality of your skin and hair. Traditional cosmetic treatments performed by a dermatologist or plastic surgeon concentrate on improving visible changes that have already occurred. But they've got it backward, according to functional medicine doctors, who try to treat the body as a single integrated system. Hair loss, for example, isn't viewed as just a scalp issue. The same goes for wrinkles or sagging skin. "Your body has the ability to heal itself—we're tapping into that," says Shan Siddiqi, MD, a holistic health and regenerative medicine physician in Miami.

How, exactly? During an appointment with a functional aesthetics doctor, you'll discuss your skin and hair concerns and goals and, after a physical assessment, be asked questions about your medical history, lifestyle, and current skin care routine. From there, baseline blood work, a hormone panel, and nutrient testing will be ordered to devise a unique-to-you treatment plan. "We're not trying to freeze or fill away the signs of aging; we're working with the body to address them internally," says Dr. Sarbaziha.

A significant piece of this puzzle is making sure your cells are firing on all cylinders so that your body functions more efficiently, says Alexander Golberg, MD, DO, a functional and aesthetic physician in New York City. "When there's sufficient energy to heal properly, your skin and hair will also improve," he says. Gut health is another consideration. "This is so key because research shows that a healthy gut is reflected on the skin," adds Dr. Sarbaziha. "Everything in the body is connected, part of the same ecosystem."

That's not to say fillers and neurotoxin injections aren't on the menu—they are. They're just typically combined with nutritional adjustments, a movement routine, and regenerative treatments (more specifics on the latter are below).

Understanding the limits

The approach is generating buzz, but not everyone is sold—mostly because the research on some of these newer treatments isn't solid. "It's easy for patients and providers to get swept up in claims about miracles," says **Steven Williams**, MD, a plastic surgeon in Dublin, California, and a past president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. "While some of these therapies are backed by rigorous science, others are just wishful thinking. It's important to be honest about the limitations."

Trending protocols such as stem cell treatments, exosomes, and NAD+ IVs are among those with a dearth of research backing. Others, however, like platelet-rich plasma, are “generally safe, effective, and supported by plenty of data,” says Dr. Siddiqi, who adds that PRP remains one of his favorite options. All this is to say it’s important to seek out a provider who blends newer solutions with tried-and-true remedies. A hair-loss patient seeing Dr. Golberg, for example, will likely have a PRP or PRF session followed by some time under a red-light helmet—and then leave with a prescription for oral minoxidil. “In a world that thrives on innovation, it’s tempting to chase the new thing,” says Dr. Williams. “People deserve results rooted in evidence, not alchemy.”

Charting the firm (and bright) future.

But even skeptics like Dr. Williams admit that “it’s clear people want more than just filling, cutting, and freezing.” So, if any—or all—of this sounds appealing, there are a few steps you can take to ensure your experience will be a good one. Dr. Siddiqi recommends seeing someone certified by the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine or the Institute for Functional Medicine, the leading names in functional medicine education (both have “find a provider” drop-downs on their websites). And just as you would with a traditional cosmetic dermatologist or plastic surgeon, if possible, seek out a physician who’s worked with someone you know and provided good results.

Many functional aesthetic therapies are still in their infancy and not yet FDA-approved, so do a little research on the ones proposed by your doc to make sure you’re comfortable. Find out how they plan to draw the blood for PRP (a manual draw is always preferred over a vacuum tube, says Dr. Siddiqi) and confirm that they’ll spin it twice. Ask to see the data behind any new supplement regimen, and make sure you know where they’re sourcing their exosomes or stem cells from. Both fast-food hamburger restaurants and high-end steak houses serve beef, but there’s a difference in the quality, says Dr. Siddiqi. The same applies here: You want to make sure your provider is using the best of the best.

At the end of the day, looking great is often about *feeling* great—and functional aesthetics providers attempt to make improvements on both fronts. That’s a beautiful thing.

The functional aesthetic treatments to know.

A few of the most common regenerative treatments offered by functional providers focus on enhancing the health and appearance of the skin and hair.

Platelet-Rich Plasma (PRP) & Platelet-Rich Fibrin (PRF)

Two of the most popular therapies for improving the look of skin and treating hair loss are PRP and PRF. The former is so well substantiated that it has become commonplace in the offices of traditional cosmetic dermatologists across the country (even Dr. Williams is a fan). Both PRP and PRF involve a simple blood draw; the blood is then spun down to extract the platelets, which are injected into the scalp or face to do their job. While they can be done on their own, PRP and PRF are often used along with microneedling and laser tightening to help speed up the healing process.

PRF is considered a second-generation platelet concentrate technology, which means (among other things) that research shows it can produce more tissue-regenerating growth factors and release them for a longer time. While four PRP or PRF sessions are typically recommended to combat hair loss, “results for thinning can be seen after the second treatment, with hair quality changes normally setting in around the three- to six-month mark,” says Dr. Golberg.

When it comes to skin, both are known to stimulate collagen and elastin formation and can be used under the eyes for brightening and in the cheeks, temples, and nasolabial folds for more fullness. “PRP floods the tissue with growth factors that signal repair, boost collagen production, and improve skin texture,” says Dr. Williams. “It’s not magic; it’s cellular logistics. If you want skin that glows, this is the treatment to consider.”

Exosomes

Think of exosomes, which can be derived from human stem cells or plant-based versions that work the same way, as tiny shuttles that travel deep into the skin, where they help cells communicate with one another to stimulate growth and healing. Rich in growth factors, exosomes can be used on the scalp to encourage thicker, healthier hair or on the skin to improve its quality. For the most part, they’re injected (or used topically) alongside microneedling, PRP, or PRF. But note: Exosomes are not FDA-approved, so their use remains a somewhat unsettled area in the world of aesthetics.

NAD+

An abbreviation for nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide, NAD+ is often referred to as the ultimate antiaging IV cocktail. It’s a coenzyme that’s present in all the cells in our body, and research shows it assists with energy production, DNA repair, and overall cellular health. It also naturally declines with age, which is why functional medicine doctors try to get more into the body via IV drips, topical products, and supplements. The theory goes that “NAD+ helps the mitochondria and can optimize cellular function,” says Dr. Siddiqi. “A healthy body will always have more radiant skin and decreased hair loss.”

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