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Unusual Uses for Botox

Botox Beyond the Face

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We may know botulinum toxin best for its role as Botox, a cosmetic wrinkle treatment. But long before Botox became popular for smoothing forehead creases and crow's feet, physicians used it to treat a variety of other conditions.

Dr. L. Mike Nayak of Nayak Plastic Surgery and Skin Enhancement Center, notes that in the hands of an experienced plastic surgeon, Botox reshapes the brow, creating a "chemical browlift to open the brow area and help decrease the appearance of excess skin on the eyelids."

Another cosmetic use is erasing 'gummy smiles' by relaxing the muscles that hoist the upper lip, he adds. "A relatively small amount of Botox will limit how high the upper lip can go and will last four to five months," Nayak says.

For individuals who want a more narrow or oval-shaped face, Botox can be injected at the angle that defines the jaw muscles, causing them to relax and become less obvious. This decreases the appearance of a square jaw, Nayak explains. He adds that beyond its cosmetic use, botulinum toxin is a very versatile and valuable medical tool. "Its original use was for straightening lazy eyes," he says. "Basically, you weaken the muscle in one eye so that it matches the muscle strength of the weaker eye." He adds that Botox is used to treat headaches, overactive bladder, excessive salivation and muscle spasticity.

Nayak also uses Botox to treat excessive perspiration, a condition known as hyperhidrosis. Dr. Dee Anna Glaser, a dermatologist and director of cosmetic and laser surgery at Saint Louis University, has made it her mission to study and treat this problem. She's a founding board member and president-elect of the International Hyperhidrosis Society.

"This disease affects about 2.8 percent of the population," Glaser says. "That's about 7.8 million Americans." Hyperhidrosis typically develops during adolescence and manifests as excessive sweating in specific, localized areas, such as the armpits, hands, feet, scalp or groin. "The sweat glands and brain miscommunicate," Glaser explains. "Botox is administered to the problem area and blocks the neurotransmitter acetylcholine so the glands don't get the messages to release sweat."

The treatment is most commonly used for excessive underarm perspiration if the patient does not respond to or tolerate the use of prescription-strength antiperspirants. "In a recent study, we found that only about 20 percent of patients can tolerate topical prescription treatments, which can be irritating," Glaser says. "In studies looking at Botox, about 85 percent of patients respond well."

Using Botox for an even more specialized purpose is Dr. Anna Conti, a neurologist on staff at St. John's Mercy Medical Center. She is one of only a few physicians in the world who specialize in the treatment of task-specific focal dystonia, a condition that causes loss of muscular control in the hands and develops after years of highly practiced movements. A former concert pianist, Conti understands the condition's traumatic effects on musicians. "It's a tragedy because the individual loses the fine control required to retain perfect mastery of the instrument," she says. Dystonia also can affect the mouth and lips, preventing musicians from playing wind instruments properly, and another form of the disorder affects vocal chords.

Conti assesses dystonia patients by observing their difficulties, a grand piano in her office allows concert pianists to demonstrate their movement problems. Once she identifies the specific muscles affected, Conti injects botulinum toxin into the muscle in order to reduce involuntary contractions and restore normal movement.

While the word Botox still brings to mind wrinkles for most people, scientists continue to study its therapeutic uses, and it may yet become one of the most widely used drugs in medicine.



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