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Slowing time and saving money

It is possible to fight wrinkles while on a budget

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Mayra Beltran Chronicle

Lynell Smith wanted to revamp her look after her divorce. She made her first visit to Dr. Paul Friedman in 2005.

Start talking about the average American woman — the one who worries about money, the one who juggles work and family, the one who cares about her appearance but looks 10 years older than she feels — and Lynell Smith, 51, says, "That's me, that's me."

Except Smith, a Nederland high school bookkeeper, is fibbing.

She does look as youthful as she feels because a few years ago she went to war against the wrinkles, sags and bags on her face. She didn't want anything as drastic as a face-lift, and she

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couldn't afford one, anyway. Instead she opted for injections of Botox and fillers and different types of laser treatments spread out over time.

Is it a good idea to try to fight the natural aging process?

That's not the topic today. Instead, the question is why millions of Americans are signing up for these cosmetic procedures and what they're getting for their money.

Smith says she wanted to look fresher and more youthful. She thought the procedures would help her in an increasingly competitive world. Also, she wanted to take advantage of the new technology, which requires minimal to no recovery time.

After uttering something between a moan and a groan she added, "And I hate getting old!"

We asked three local dermatologists to talk about some face-saving procedures and to rank them according to price.

Here's what we found:

Bargain basement

- 1. Sunscreen.
- 1. Sunscreen.
- 2. Sunscreen.

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3. Sunscreen.

Drs. Deborah MacFarlane, Paul Friedman and Ramsey Markus say it in unison:

The best and cheapest thing people can do to preserve their skin and prevent skin cancer is to use sunscreen.

Which one?

Look for a product that is SPF 15 or 30 that blocks both UVA and UVB light.

MacFarlane tells patients to apply sunblock to their faces right after they brush their teeth, and while they're at it, to smear some on their necks and the back of their hands, too. She also likes sun hats and shirts with ultraviolet protective fabric. Look for them, she says, at sporting-goods stores or on the Internet.

Markus recommends a daily moisturizer, which will hydrate the top layer of skin, and warns against most over-the-counter wrinkle creams.

For those who can't keep themselves away from those drugstore aisles, Markus says Oil of Olay Regenerist products have tested well against much pricier potions, and all three doctors mention over-the-counter products with retinol, which is basically a weak version of the prescription cream Retin-A.

Most people have heard of it. Retin-A is a retinoid, or a vitamin A derivative. Though the cream, gel or ointment can be irritating to the skin, the doctors say it diminishes fine lines and improves skin texture after three to six months of use.

A 45-gram tube of generic Retin-A (0.05 percent) costs about \$70.

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Real money

Many minimally invasive cosmetic procedures cost a couple of hundred dollars, more or less.

But do they work?

MacFarlane says acid peels, offered in a variety of strengths, even out skin pigmentation and improve texture. They're usually \$60 to \$100 a session, and, done at regular intervals over time, give the skin a nice glow.

MacFarlane, who has joint appointments at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center and UT's Medical School at Houston, likes the peels because they also remove small, precancerous growths.

Markus, an assistant professor of dermatology at Baylor College of Medicine, says he's not a fan.

"If a patient is using Retin-A, she can do little mini-peels herself at home every night."

Markus also gives a thumbs down to microdermabrasions, which are like mini-sandings of the face. The price is right — \$80 to \$250 a pop — but Markus doesn't like the results.

When he was a fellow at Harvard University, he administered microdermabrasions to half of a colleague's face for six months. When they finally ended the experiment, neither of them saw any

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improvement.

Reports are also mixed on photo facials, which use intense pulsed light to reduce or eliminate brown spots and redness and cost about \$500 a pop.

Friedman doesn't do them at all.

Markus says the treatments have improved greatly over the years, even if they don't do much for wrinkles. With the right patients, he says, he gets good results.

Who are the wrong patients?

Markus wouldn't do photo facials on most African-Americans. As a rule, he says, they look fresher and more youthful longer because their dark skin serves as a natural sunscreen. When they do have the minimally invasive cosmetic procedures, however, the photo facials and certain laser treatments and chemical peels can cause discoloration.

Each patient, Markus says, has to be evaluated on an individual basis.

Which brings him to the subject of Botox and a less-well-known product, Dysport. Both are injected with thin needles to get rid of forehead wrinkles, lines between the eyes and crow's feet.

Treatments range in price from \$300 to \$600, depending on the area to be covered and the amount injected.

When Markus first heard of Botox about 10 years ago, he thought patients would never go for it.

"People hate injections, particularly injections in the head," he says, "and the treatments only last three or four months."



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He has to laugh today at how wrong he was.

"Botox has been incredibly popular," he says. "Nothing else helps those forehead wrinkles as well. People come to me saying they look angry or tired, that their faces form a chronic frown."

With Botox, Markus says, the wrinkles get much better or go away altogether. In the process, the eyebrows lift and the eyes open wide.

The result, he says, is a much more youthful appearance. It's safe, too, he adds.

"If it weren't," he jokes, "half of the residents of California and Texas would be gone by now."

"Fillers," including Restylane and Juvederm, usually are used on the bottom half of the face. They are injected into the skin to smooth out overlying wrinkles, which are plumped up from below the surface.

Friedman says the products work by attracting water molecules to the injection site and not only smooth out the wrinkle or fold of skin but stimulate collagen production. Those injections cost \$600 to \$1,000 per treatment, depending on the substance used and the quantity, and they usually last six months to a year. Restylane has been shown to last up to 18 months with follow-up injections.

Big bucks

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Friedman says the real cosmetic breakthroughs in the past few years have involved lasers.

He has an arsenal of 20 kinds, and he decides which one to use depending on the skin type and problem.

In general, Friedman says, lasers stimulate new collagen growth, smooth out wrinkles, decrease brown spots and pore size, and improve broken blood vessels and overall skin texture. Prices vary from \$300 to \$5,000.

Say a patient is willing to spend \$1,000. Would a laser treatment help her?

It depends on the patient, says Friedman, a clinical assistant professor of dermatology at the UT Medical School at Houston.

As a rule, young clients need less and older clients need more.

Before the recession, Friedman says, patients would come, pile on the treatments and come back as soon as possible for more.

"Today" he adds, "people say, 'I'm happy with this. Let's give the procedure time to take effect, and I'll come back as soon as I can.' "

Friedman says he and all reputable dermatologists work with their patients. They talk frankly about costs — insurance doesn't pay except in unusual cases — they explain what works and what doesn't, and they try to make sure their patients have realistic expectations.

But here's the sobering truth after talking with this panel of highly trained physicians. Even they are not in total agreement about what works and what doesn't.

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Las Vegas

Smith, the Nederland bookkeeper, first went to Friedman in 2005. After her 26-year marriage ended in divorce, she wanted a lift, a way to feel young and attractive.

During that first visit, she mentioned a freckle on her chest. She'd already shown it to her regular doctor, and he'd said it was nothing.

Friedman looked at the freckle, thought it was nothing but decided to remove it.

The freckle turned out to be melanoma, a potentially deadly form of skin cancer.

After Smith got past that scare, she started the cosmetic procedures.

Yes, she says, the bills are hard to juggle on an already tight budget.

She pauses for a beat, then confesses.

About the time she started the cosmetic work, she went to Las Vegas for the weekend and won \$6,000. She's used some of that money to help pay for treatments.

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