

# SHOT IN THE DARK

A growing number of women are administering TCA peels and dubious fat-fighting injections to themselves. Their cautionary tales. **By Hallie Levine**

**D**awn\*, a Westchester, New York, interior designer, recently hosted what she calls a "peel party." "I invited ten friends over, we broke out the Chardonnay, then spread alpha hydroxy peels all over our faces," she says. "The solution was as strong as what you'd get in a doctor's office, so although the ingredients came with very specific directions, we were still nervous. I kept the neutralizing solution in front of us in case someone's face started burning. Three minutes later, we all grabbed for the can-it felt like thousands of tiny needles were stabbing our skin! Afterward, a couple of the women looked like they had third degree burns. My husband [a physician] was furious with me. He said, 'You'd never give yourself a home perm, but just look at what you did to your face!'"

Dawn—who says she got the peel solution from a drug representative who works with her husband—doesn't know how severe the burns really were, because she and her friends were too embarrassed to show a dermatologist or plastic surgeon what they'd done. But she insists that, ultimately, she was thrilled with the results. "Within a week or so, the burns had subsided, and everyone's skin looked glowing-gorgeous," she says. "I don't have the patience to wait weeks for an appointment with my dermatologist, so now I do peels myself, when I want and as often as I want."

As frightening as Dawn's story sounds, doctors say a growing number of women like her are performing medical or professional-level beauty procedures on themselves. The recent fad for plastic surgery reality television may have partly inspired this kind of experimentation. "Women watch shows like *Extreme Makeover* and, think, Well doing an occasional chemical peel on myself isn't such a big deal,"



"I'm squeamish about giving myself a shot," one woman said, "but I think I'll be fine."

says Kaveh Alizadeh, a cosmetic and reconstructive surgeon at Manhattan Eye, Ear, and Throat Hospital in New York City. Internet message boards dedicated to swapping advice on practices such as peels, microdermabrasion, and injecting purported fat-burning substances abound, and they can further embolden an

amateur. "A woman might mention trying something to a friend who would say, 'That's dangerous!' and she'd be deterred," says Ann Kearney Cooke, a body-image specialist in Cincinnati. "But if she goes into a chat room where all the women are trying it, it begins to seem normal."

\*Not their real names

Susan Cruzan, a spokeswoman for the FDA, says the agency's ability to regulate treatments like peels depends on what claims each product makes, and therefore they can only act on a case-by-case basis. But medical experts are deeply concerned. "Buying professional-grade products is unsafe, unwise, and totally inappropriate," says Rod Rohrich, former president of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. "Public safety is at stake."

## PEELS

Considering their popularity in dermatologists' offices, perhaps it should come as no surprise that chemical peels are the process women most commonly attempt on their own. Trish Jarret, a 31-year-old nurse from Oklahoma City, regularly burns her face with professional strength trichloroacetic acid (TCA). She describes one of her recent experiences with the solution: "I was on my knees, rocking back and forth, about to pass out from the pain. Afterward, I freaked out. I looked like I was wearing a mask—my skin was really shiny and wrinkled like paper. A couple days later, it started peeling: I felt like the guy in *Poltergeist* who sees his skin coming off in the mirror." But a week later, Jarret's skin had healed, as had her memory of the pain: "Next time, instead of using 50 percent, I'll dilute my solution down to about 25 percent."

Doctors regularly cope with the aftermath of home peels that cause more damage than Jarret's. "I've seen several women this past year who have given themselves third-degree burns after using 20 percent TCA," says Debra Jaliman, professor of dermatology at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. What compounds the problem is that when the peel solution sits around for months, it begins to evaporate, making the contents of the bottle more concentrated. "So if you put old solution on your face, it's the equivalent of 50 or 60 percent TCA," Jaliman says. "That's much stronger than anything you'd get in a doctor's office."

Roger Bassin, a cosmetic surgeon in Orlando, had one particularly memorable experience with a patient who'd done her own peel. "I've never seen any one as

hysterical as a woman who came in because she'd permanently whitened her upper lip trying to do a chemical peel at home," he says. He had to lighten the rest of the patient's face so it would match the damaged area. "Ironically, she tried doing the peel herself at home to save money, but ended up spending \$5,000 to fix the damage," he says. "It was an expensive mistake but she swore that she'd never play doctor on herself again."

In a bizarre offshoot of the peel phenomenon, some women even use over-the-counter wart remover in attempts to eliminate fine lines around their lips. Alexandra\*explains that she tried it because "it's got a very strong concentration of salicylic

***"I was on my knees, rocking back and forth, about to pass out from the pain."***

acid." Dermatologists point out that the wart solution could easily cause burns and scarring around the delicate lip area.

Jaliman witnessed an even more extreme practice. "Women have come into my office hysterical because they were severely burned after putting photo-developing solution on their faces," she says. "I have no idea how they got it—but I suspect they know people who work in photo shops, who could tell them that Kodak makes it with 70 percent glycolic acid. One woman poured the liquid right onto her face from the bottle, kept it on for two minutes, and washed it off. She was in such pain, she called my office right away. Her face was a mass of blistering, red, swollen second-degree burns that I wasn't sure would heal without permanent scarring. Thankfully, it did, but it took a couple of weeks before the skin was fully healed, and months before the redness had faded away completely."

## ABRASIVES

Beyond peels, many women attempt to look younger by employing professional methods of abrading the skin. Dawn bought her own microdermabrasion machine at an industry trade show but wasn't impressed with the results: "I don't think it was professional grade," she says. But other women do shell out thousands to get a model similar to what's offered in doctors' offices and day spas. "I tell all of my friends, 'Why spend hundreds of dollars when you can get the same results at home?'" asks Ashley, a former aesthetician who recently purchased her own \$15,000 machine. "I charge them \$25 instead of \$250," she says. "It's a real bargain!" While microdermabrasion is not as risky as a TCA peel, in the hands of an amateur, it can present a real risk of permanent scarring. "On professional machines, the suction's so strong that you could cause severe bleeding in a matter of seconds," says Robert Weiss, a professor of dermatology at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore.

Instead of grinding off the top layers of their skin, some women turn to needling, or massaging the skin with a roller covered in small needles. The Dermaroller, for instance, is touted by its manufacturer as a treatment for acne scars and crow's-feet. Bridget Heidorn, a homemaker in Carefree, Arizona, ordered hers from a German website. Heidorn says she runs it all over her face, even around her eyes: "There's no bleeding or irritation unless you go nuts and push way too hard." But David Colbert, a New York City dermatologist, cautions, "It's very easy to cause bleeding that can lead to scarring, skin discoloration, or even infections."

## INJECTIONS

An injection that purports to melt fat clearly seems to be too good to be true and in the case of Lipostabil, a form of the nutritional supplement lecithin, it isn't FDA approved. But that isn't stopping women from getting their hands on it. Although Lipostabil is widely used

in Europe and South America, it was just banned for cosmetic purposes by Brazil's equivalent of the FDA (that agency lists the known risks as nausea, diarrhea, depression, and heart arrhythmia). In fact, this is one area where the FDA can take broad action: "We have sent letters to several websites asking them to stop distributing Lipostabil—they were marketing it as an injectable product, but they're not allowed to do that without FDA approval," Cruzan says.

That news hasn't reached Maggie\* a Silicon Valley real estate developer. An avid user who saw a California doctor for an initial injection, she plans to do follow-up shots on her own. "You inject it into your body with a little device known as a lipo gun," she explains. "Sure, I'm a little squeamish about giving myself a shot, but I think I'll be fine." Experts are worried about the extent of the product's availability. "I don't know if catastrophic is the correct word, but it's pretty close," says Lawrence Reed, a plastic surgeon at the New York Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. "We have no evidence that Lipostabil works, no evidence that it's safe, and if you try to inject something into your body, you could hit a nerve or a blood vessel."

It often takes a real disaster to make women realize the dangers of treating themselves. Doctors cite the odd case of a woman who injected herself with medical-grade saline solution to try to eliminate her spider veins and wound up with an ulcer, and another who tried to burn off her tattoo by touching her skin to an open flame and is now permanently scarred. And David Goldberg, a New York City dermatologist, described one especially distressed patient: "A woman came in with her face so red and raw, she looked like she'd been in an automobile accident," he says. "It turned out she'd bought a mini-microdermabrasion machine and had used it for so long and at such a high intensity that she'd really damaged her face. She kept saying to me, 'How could this have happened? It couldn't be nearly as powerful as the ones in spas.'" With treatment, her skin healed, but the bottom line is that these products can be strong enough to do harm. ■