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FacingUp

Will new minimally-invasive devices make the facelift obsolete? Not a chance, says Brazilian surgeon Dr. Marco Faria Correa. Dan Childs reports.

Photos courtesy of Dr. Marco Faria Correa

If you've been keeping up with the latest news in facial rejuvenation, there is little doubt that you have stumbled across the phrase "non-surgical facelift" at least five times. If the prospect sounds intriguing, that's because it is. This is particularly relevant when you consider the thousands of potential facelift patients out there who are looking for a facial nip and tuck – without the nip, please.

But with an ever-growing range of

options from radiofrequency to ultrasound hitting the aesthetic facial scene, a natural question is begged: will facelift surgery ever be relegated to being a thing of the past?

When this question is posed to most plastic and cosmetic surgeons, the answer is a resounding "no." Brazil's Dr. Marco Faria Correa is one such surgeon – and he says that patients must come to the realisation that facelift surgery is still the "gold

standard" when it comes to lifting and resupporting the sagging tissues of the aging face.

"In Brazil six years ago, many doctors started trying out all of these alternatives," Dr. Marco notes. "Suddenly there was an avalanche of options that would supposedly lift the face. But many of these patients, after trying non-surgical options, realise that they in fact need to go in for a surgical facelift if they want to achieve a



Brazilian plastic surgeon Dr. Marco Faria Correa says advancements in facelift surgery give today's patient a more natural result than ever before.

television shows, you can see why. These programmes show people too much blood, as well as doctors working very aggressively and roughly. But in reality, not all doctors work like that. Our surgeries are less bloody and have less bruising post-operatively than what is seen on TV. But people, quite understandably, are scared. So if they think they can get results without cutting and without anaesthetic, they will go ahead and give it a try."

However, notes Dr. Marco, aggressive marketing of many minimally-invasive therapies often leads patients to believe that these treatments will offer much better results than they are intended to deliver.

"Many of those who offer these procedures and use these machines are overselling the results," he says. "I'm not saying that they don't work – these methods certainly work for certain conditions, but none of them are a facelift."

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certain level of rejuvenation."

Thus, he notes, patients must sharpen their knowledge and expectations of the results of any facial procedures they may be considering. And this means knowing what the brave new world of minimally-invasive facial procedures can reasonably offer – and what it cannot.

THE QUEST FOR THE NON-SURGICAL LIFT

Throughout history, the hunt for the fountain of youth has generally come attached with its fair share of pain. Just ask Vasco da Gama. This prevailing wisdom has been challenged, however, in the past few years. Suddenly, it seems, procedures such as intense pulsed light (IPL), fillers and even botulinum toxin type A injections are being touted as treatments that can "lift" and "rejuvenate" the tissues of the face.

But why fear the facelift? The reasons that excite people when it comes to minimally-invasive procedures, it turns out, are pretty simple.

"People are always afraid of anaesthetic and afraid of cutting," Dr. Marco says. "When you take a look at cosmetic surgery

ditional facelift surgery when it comes to redraping facial tissues. And he adds that the same principle can also be applied to most suture-based methods of non-surgical face lifting.

"The suture lift can also help for a while if you have hanging skin that needs to be resuspended," he says. "As for APTOS, the results are actually relatively temporary when compared with facelift surgery. Yes, they can hold the tissues of the face up for a certain amount of time, but after a while you lose the result.

"I have actually used many of these methods myself," he continues. "But we have realised that many of these treatments didn't give the person what we promised them. I'm not saying that all of these methods do not work. What I am saying is that for a patient who already has hanging tissues and flabby skin, they will need to go in for a surgical lift."

Thus, it turns out that determining when minimally-invasive is the way to go – or when it is time for a facelift – plays a big part in whether or not a patient is satisfied with their chosen cosmetic procedures after the fact.

SO, WHEN IS A FACELIFT THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION?

In many ways, the choice of whether to go with a surgical or non-surgical route to facial rejuvenation depends on a number of factors – your age, your facial structure, and how profound you would like the results of your procedure to be. Thus, determining whether you'll be happier with the convenience of a minimally-invasive procedure often requires you to figure out exactly what your face needs to look younger.

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"Maybe if a patient is 30 years old and they are just starting to see the first signs of aging in their faces, they can give (non-surgical methods) a try," Dr. Marco says. "But when you get to 30-plus all the way into the 50s, these methods alone will not be effective if you really want a lift of the tissues."

If, on the other hand, you're looking to endow your face with a somewhat younger, refreshed appearance, a number of minimally-invasive options could be the ticket. Dr. Marco says that fillers, for example, can restore much of the youthful

But resetting the clock back 10 or 15 years... that, Dr. Marco says, will likely require facelift surgery. Fortunately for those looking to go to surgical lengths to regain their youthful look, facelift surgery today is more advanced – and gives more natural-looking results – than ever before.

TODAY'S FACELIFT

A far cry from the skin lift of the 1970s, facelift procedures today have the potential to offer natural-looking results tailored to pretty much any specific region

we started lifting the SMAS. This allowed us to perform a midface lift in which we were lifting all of the tissues together, not just the skin."

For the uninitiated, the SMAS layer is to the skin what an underlay is to a carpet. Stretch the carpet alone, and though it will be tighter for a while, it will eventually distend and return to its original laxity. However, by instead tightening the underlying layer, the carpet is also pulled tight, allowing for a more long-lasting result.

"This technique results in a lift that is more aesthetically pleasing and which lasts longer," Dr. Marco adds. "We're also not pulling the hairline back, as we used to do when we were just lifting the skin. In this way, we don't need to stretch the skin too much, which allows us to maintain the hairline."

Other new enhancements include the use of endoscopic techniques. Endoscopy involves the use of a camera mounted on a flexible tube in order to guide tiny instruments beneath the skin of the patient. In this way, the surgeon requires only very small incisions in order to perform complex surgery – all with the same results.

But what if these results aren't enough to endow the patient with an overall younger look? That, Dr. Marco says, is where many minimally invasive techniques enter the scene with formidable results.

"When a patient goes for a forehead lift I recommend using BOTOX®," Dr.

A surgical facelift will not stop time in its tracks. Thus, after a surgical facelift, you will probably return to your pre-surgical looks in 10 years or so. But since the gains themselves are permanent, your face will continue to age behind schedule.

volume that aging faces tend to lose over time. Botulinum toxin type A injections can diminish mechanical wrinkles in the forehead, and light-based treatments such as IPL and lasers can improve the complexion and take care of minor wrinkles. Throw in the subtle tissue lift offered by radiofrequency treatments and other therapies, and you'll emerge from the doctor's clinic with a younger look – for a while at least.

of the face. No matter where on the face the procedure is performed, however, facelift procedures today are similar in that they focus on tightening the supporting layer of the skin known as the sub-muscular aponeurotic system, or SMAS for short.

"Many years ago, we just used to do a facelift in which we would undermine and lift the skin," Dr. Marco says. "So about 12 years ago we began a new era in which

Marco notes. "While these injections alone will do little to correct sagging tissues, BOTOX® can help a facelift a bit by relaxing the brow."

IPL and laser treatment, he adds, can contribute to the results of a facelift by taking care of pigmentation spots, wrinkles and old skin. And fillers, he notes, can be used to augment the underlying facial structures, as well as to fill in deep wrinkles.

"With aging you have some bone absorption, so that's why we would take advantage of fillers so we can restore this volume," he says.

ROLLING BACK THE CLOCK

Once patients become familiar with how a facelift procedure is performed, the next natural question is often, "How many years can it turn back the hands of time?"

"That actually depends on how strong the facelift is," answers Dr. Marco. "Some patients ask for a stronger pull. But on average they can give the patient an appearance that is 10 to 15 years younger than what they started with – or five years, depending how old the patient is prior to the operation."

Dr. Marco is quick to note, however, that a surgical facelift will not stop time in its tracks. Thus, after a surgical facelift, you will probably return to your pre-surgical looks in 10 years or so. But since the gains themselves are permanent, your face will continue to age behind schedule. So a 45-year-old patient will look 55 when they blow out the candles on the cake at their 65th birthday party. Unless, of course, they decided to head back to their surgeon once their face returned to its 45-year-old appearance – an option that Dr. Marco says many are willing to take.

"After 10 or so years, that is usually when the patient is unhappy with something again," he notes. "Usually the patient will come in for a surgery again every eight to 15 years. Some patients do this three, four or five times. You can almost stop the aging process of the face at around 40-plus if you do it properly."

COSTS AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

While stopping the clock at the middle-age mark may be a cause for celebration among those seeking a permanently youthful appearance, prospective patients should keep in mind that the fun will only last as long as their pocketbooks do. And when you compare the cost of surgery to that of a few rounds of minimally-invasive and non-surgical treatments, it is

easy to see why many choose to rely on lunch-hour fixes instead of the scalpel.

In the long run, however, those who are seeking a long-term rejuvenation may still be best advised to consider surgery – particularly considering that many minimally-invasive options, such as fillers and IPL, require regular repeat sessions to maintain their effects.

"With temporary fillers, for example, they are spending money, and once it is absorbed they are right back where they started. That's why many people are disappointed with this method."

The other side of the equation, of course, involves the dreaded "d" word. Yes, we're talking about downtime – and anytime you're dealing with surgery, you're going to have to bank on it, according to Dr. Marco.

"This goes for any effective thing," he says. "When something is effective, the downtime will be between seven and 10 days. Some patients, after five to seven days, can even resume their daily lives. Most patients are okay after 10 days. But for a few, the functional recovery time


takes more than two to three weeks."

Thus, this inescapable reality must also be a consideration that patients weigh when making their decision whether or not to opt for surgery.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Whichever way you cut it, surgery is a big decision. Pair this with the fact that to many of us, the very mention of surgery causes us to curl our toes. It is therefore easy to see why many patients find the idea of minimally-invasive alternatives a more palatable option.

However, Dr. Marco says that the most important thing is for patients to understand that no non-surgical method available today can offer results that are as dramatic and long lasting as facelift surgery. As long as potential patients understand this fact, he says, they can rest assured that their final decision is an informed one.

"When a patient goes under the knife, it is a very personal decision," he says. "They should just realise that every procedure has its purpose." 

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