



An injection of sense

Botox helps millions to keep ageing signs at bay. But is it dangerous? Not if you follow these guidelines, says expert **Dr Peter Forrester**

Botulinum injections such as *Botox* are a popular treatment for the problem of facial lines. But should we be concerned about recent media headlines casting doubts over their safety?

With time, repeated contraction of facial muscles cause overlying skin to wrinkle. And, as the ageing process induces a gradual loss of collagen and elastin in the skin, the 'dynamic wrinkles' – as facial lines and wrinkles caused in this way are known – gradually become permanent.

Injecting tiny amounts of botulinum into wrinkle-causing muscles will temporarily block the chemical signals that make them contract, causing them to stay relaxed. In turn, reducing the movement of the muscles prevents creasing of the skin, enabling it to relax and heal. As a result, the dynamic wrinkles soften or disappear, leaving skin looking smoother.

There is an art to botulinum therapy. Skilfully applied, it results in a smoother skin and significantly fewer wrinkles, but the face retains some of its movement and expression. One should still be able to frown partially or look surprised.

The US Food and Drug Administration has recently announced a safety review of the use of botulinum products, following reports of some serious adverse reactions. With such reports, however, it is essential to look closely at the circumstances surrounding the event. In particular, one should note whether the botulinum was given for medical or cosmetic reasons, exactly which product was used and who administered it.

For example, problems have occurred through the use of very high doses of botulinum to treat limb spasms in children with cerebral palsy. However, the doses of botulinum used for cosmetic purposes are typically 20-100 times lower than those used in the treatment of muscle spasms. Meanwhile in Florida, in 2004, newspaper headlines blamed *Botox* for the hospitalization of four people. Yet subsequent investigations revealed that the doctor's licence had previously been suspended, and that he had not used genuine *Botox*. Instead, he had resorted to a non-approved preparation of botulinum meant purely for laboratory research.

By contrast, from 2002-08 there were 13 million cosmetic procedures in the USA using genuine *Botox*, and reports of serious adverse events were extremely rare. This is an impressive safety record – far better than that of many medical treatments currently in everyday use. As with any injection, minor complications such as bruising, redness, tenderness and swelling may occur, but these resolve themselves within a few days. In addition, when *Botox* is used to treat forehead lines, an adjacent muscle may be inadvertently

weakened, resulting in either eyebrow droop or excessive lift. These phenomena, however, are both uncommon and will always correct themselves as the effect of the *Botox* wears off.

There are clear lessons here. Firstly, check that your practitioner is using an authentic and licensed brand of botulinum. In the UK, licensed products include *Botox*, *Vistabel*, *Dysport* and *Azzalure*.

Secondly, stop to ask yourself how the product may have been obtained. These brands are not cheap, so if your practitioner is offering decidedly cut-price treatments, be very wary indeed.

Thirdly, check that your practitioner is experienced and properly trained in the use of botulinum for cosmetic purposes. In the UK, all botulinum products are prescription only medicines, which means that they may only be administered by a doctor, or on the prescription of a doctor who has checked that they are safe and appropriate for you. Further, your practitioner should have fully explained the expected results and possible side-effects. Being properly informed and asking the right questions is the best way to ensure that your *Botox* treatment is not only effective, but free from unnecessary problems and – above all – safe.

■ *Dr Peter Forrester has over 20 years' experience in the field of cosmetic medicine. For your free initial consultation contact: The Waldegrave Clinic, 82 Waldegrave Road, Teddington, Middx TW11 8NY. Tel: (020) 8943 2424. For further information visit: www.drforrester.co.uk*