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The Ugly Side of Beauty Bargains

When Dana spotted an internet coupon offering Juvéderm for a jaw-dropping \$135, she added it to her cart stat. Since the hyaluronic-acid filler can run up to 10 times that amount, it seemed like an amazing deal. Fast-forward to a month after her appointment and the injection site on Dana's face flared up, becoming red and swollen. She sought the advice of dermatologist Howard Sobel, MD, who diagnosed her with a bio-film infection, which is caused by bacteria in the filler or from an unclean injection site and can take months to clear.

Shady beauty "bargains"—and their ensuing issues—are becoming widespread across the country as the demand for injectables grows, particularly with the under-30 set. "I'd say 1 in 4 [bargain hunters] suffers some kind of complication," estimates Miami dermatologist Manjula Jegasothy, MD. Those range from short-lived irritation to allergic reactions to persistent infections, nerve damage, facial drooping, disfigurement, and in rare cases, blindness or paralysis. Here, the troubling—and sometimes terrifying—reasons you should never get cosmetic procedures on the cheap.

The Product May Be Imported

Curious why her service was so inexpensive, Dana asked her injector. "He told me he gets a great deal from Canada," she recalls. What he didn't tell her was that purchasing filler from outside the country is illegal.

Fact: The only way for an injector to know that a product is authentic and FDA-approved is to order it directly from the manufacturer or an authorized distributor. Yet the 20 docs we interviewed have all been solicited by dealers making cryptic offerings. "We often get e-mails pushing discounted fillers from so-called Canadian pharmacies," says New York City plastic surgeon Lawrence Bass, MD. And as Bryan Smith, an associate vice president and senior counsel at Allergan, explains, "These tend to be products approved for use in other countries that are initially sold to legitimate distributors but fall into the hands of criminals, who then sell them for a cut price to doctors' offices and medical spas in the U.S."

But wait...if an injectable product gets the thumbs-up somewhere in the world, doesn't that mean it's safe? Nope. These imports—fillers, in particular—face less government scrutiny than injectables that have met the FDA's requirements for copious long-term data. In Europe, for example, "fillers get banged out a mile a minute because they're not as strictly regulated, which is why they have some 160 different products on the market while we have only about 20," says Honolulu plastic surgeon Clyde Ishii, MD, president of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery. And lax standards beget questionable quality. "Many



European fillers have characteristics, like hardness and lumps, that Americans would never find acceptable," notes Dr. Bass.

Neurotoxins (muscle-freezing injections, such as Botox), on the other hand, tend to be more tightly controlled across Europe because, unlike fillers, they're classified as drugs, not medical devices, explains Andy Pickett, PhD, a neurotoxin expert for Galderma. But, as Smith adds, "anything being shipped to the U.S. from outside our supply chain means we have no idea how it was handled, transported, or stored." And when improperly stored, fillers and neurotoxins can degrade and lose their efficacy.

The Injector May Cut Corners

"Some cut-rate injectors operate by doing work at or below cost in the hope that you'll stay on later at full price," says Dr. Bass. But others curb their losses by overly diluting the products, minimizing their effect and possibly increasing your odds of infection. "Fillers can be contaminated when taken out of their native syringes to be mixed with water or saline," notes Lara Devgan, MD, a plastic surgeon in New York City.

Another sketchy practice: Some unscrupulous providers save half-used syringes of filler to inject into the same patient (or worse, another patient!) at a later date. Reputable physicians consider filler a single-



use item and charge accordingly. "Splitting the syringe just to save a few dollars introduces needless risk," adds Dr. Devgan. **In addition, recapped leftover filler can separate over time, making it harder to inject or possibly causing lumps at the site, says Dr. Jegasothy.**

"Bargain-basement injections can also signal inexperienced providers looking for practice," says Dara Liotta, MD, a plastic surgeon in New York City. That's yet another reason so many medical spas can undersell. Those injections "often aren't done by doctors but by people with less training, like physician's assistants," says dermatologist Debra Jaliman, MD.

The Filler Could Be Fake

While less pervasive than unapproved imports, imitations are also on the rise, according to George Karavetsos. He busted hundreds of unauthorized distributors and fraudulent practitioners for selling or ordering and injecting phony formulas during his 2015 to 2017 tenure as the director of the FDA's Office of Criminal Investigations.

What's in them is anyone's guess: "It could be silicone, cement...anything," says Jeanette Graf, MD, a dermatologist in Great Neck, New York.

According to Pickett, who has traced and studied counterfeit botulinum toxin, fakes can range from unconvincing copies to exact replicas. Their contents are just as inconsistent.

"In some we tested, we couldn't detect any toxin at all," he says. "In others, we found many multiples of the labeled potency." But potentially more dangerous, he says, is "the fact that these products could have been made in someone's garage. There's no sterility or quality and safety assurance."

The Bottom Line

Botox costs about \$6 a unit (roughly \$600 a vial) for pros to buy legitimately from Allergan, the drug's manufacturer. "Most doctors charge between \$13 and \$25 per unit to cover the cost of the product and general overhead and profit," says dermatologist Paul Jarrod Frank, MD. Fillers typically range from \$600 to \$1,500 per syringe. So if you're seeing them for much less, it's too good to be true. ■

How Not to Get Suckered

Google your injector. Find a board-certified cosmetic dermatologist or plastic surgeon with a valid license to practice in the U.S. who treats patients in a medical office. Or use the find-a-physician locator on the product websites.

Inspect your fillers. Make sure the box is in English and unopened. Look for the sticker with the product name, lot number, and expiration date. "The doc should place this in your chart. You can ask to see it," says Dara Liotta, MD.

Eye your toxin. For Botox, find *OnabotulinumtoxinA* on the vial and carton, plus an Allergan hologram on the vial. For Dysport, *AbobotulinumtoxinA* should appear, and *Galderma* should be on the upper left corner of the carton.