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CAN FACIALS RUIN YOUR SKIN?

Your favorite regular beauty treatment may be doing your face more harm than good.
Our experts weigh in. By Anne-Marie Guarnieri

SIX MONTHS INTO a regimen of monthly treatments with one of New York's most in-demand facialists, Samantha* was thrilled that her skin was radiant and convinced that her pores looked smaller. But were those pockmarks on her temples? A trip to her dermatologist confirmed what she feared: Samantha had developed scars from too frequent extractions. A laser treatment to smooth them would cost thousands. "I felt so stupid that I had let someone do that to my face. Yet I was somewhat relieved; my doctor told me he had another patient come in that day with a terrible burn all over her face from a facialist acid peel."

Facials can be good for your skin—if you're in the right hands, says Dendy Engelman, M.D., a New York dermatologist. "Licensed aestheticians have equipment to treat problems you can't treat at home, and can evaluate your skin-care protocol," she says. But a facialist is not a substitute for your dermatologist. "They are not trained to assess skin disease and cancers. A doctor ensures that you are getting proper care."

Both Engelman and Harold Lancer, M.D., a dermatologist in Beverly Hills, have treated many facials gone bad. "In a given day, I see three or four new patients who have been damaged somehow in a strip-mall medi spa, chain spa, or non-board-certified dermatology setting—that's a huge number," Lancer says. The complications run the gamut from allergic reactions and chemical burns to infection and scarring caused by extractions or improperly sterilized devices. "Often there's no [medical] history taken, so the procedure doesn't fit your profile," he adds. "You can end up with discoloration or infected pores, which can lead to permanent scarring."

Extractions are especially problematic, says S. Mangtali Jegasothy, M.D., a dermatologist in Miami. "I've seen bridesmaids who went to the spa the day before the wedding and they're all red and spotty the day of," she says. "The technician over-extracted or

extracted the wrong things, like a mole they thought was an acne comedone, or even a basal cell cancer." In other words, leave the poking and prodding to a skilled dermatologist, who will know what bumps can safely be poked and prodded.

Facial chains and medi spas, which offer a variety of services with an emphasis on speed and affordability, hold a lot of appeal in our time-crunched world. But the results of a botched treatment, performed by a rushed, inexperienced practitioner, can linger on your face forever. London-based aesthetician Caroline Hirons says you can't expect a quickie facial to fix ongoing problems like acne. She's also against aggressive exfoliating treatments, such as microdermabrasion ("it's so old-fashioned"). Getting a glow-boosting "pampering and plumping" facial is

perfectly fine; for anything more serious, like treating dark spots or for peels and fillers, skip the convenience places, she says, and go to a pro.

To get the most out of a facial, says Los Angeles aesthetician Shani Darden, make sure that the products used are tailored to your skin type—something an untrained facialist may

not know, so don't be afraid to speak up. Rich creams are a no-no for the acne-prone, while clay masks may be too harsh on drier complexions, and fragrance-heavy lotions and toners can cause irritation on all skin types. Even products that claim to be all natural, like oils, can clog pores or trigger inflammation. A good aesthetician will also ask about allergies you may have or medications you're on, to help prevent potentially bad reactions.

Finally, while we all love a bargain, don't be swayed by deals, add-ons, and coupons, Lancer cautions. "Facial packages are often used as a way to get you to spend more on other treatments," he says. "But I can tell you, when it comes to repairing something that's gone wrong, the costs can be in the thousands of dollars." ■ *Name has been changed

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Photograph by Kenneth Willardt

BEAUTY BAZAAR An at-home facial with L'Oréal Paris Pure-Clay Clear & Comfort Mask is a safe bet; it calms and soothes dehydrated skin (\$12.99). Earring, Chloé. See Where to Buy for shopping details. Fashion editor: Amanda Alagem. Beauty editor: Anne-Marie Guarnieri. Model: Alena Po; hair: Kayla Michele/documentbeauty for Message Organics; makeup: Erin Parsons for Maybelline New York.

