

Cosmetic Facial Acupuncture: More Than Skin Deep



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As graduates of acupuncture school, we proudly display our new diplomas on our office walls to assure patients of our academic education and professional proficiency. Although graduation from acupuncture school marks a milestone, it is only the beginning of our professional career. As acupuncturists, we are *lifelong* learners in the truest sense of the word. In addition to enhancing our skills, continuing education offers excellent exposure to a multitude of new treatment styles, approaches, techniques, and modalities. Post-graduate courses also provide the opportunity for advanced study and education in specialty fields such as fertility, pediatrics, and cosmetic facial acupuncture.

Nearly three decades ago, as one of the first practitioners in the United States to specialize in cosmetic facial acupuncture, the unpaved road was not easy. In 1993, with my masters degree in Biological Nutrition, five years of experience working at New York University Medical School, and my acupuncture diploma in hand, I headed off to China to begin my training in Chinese facial acupuncture. Upon my return to the U.S., I studied facial anatomy by observing ocular and facial dissections at Columbia University, and invested 200 hours in esthetics training to learn about skin. It was then, after years of integrating my eastern medicine experience with my knowledge of western medical science, that I was able to create my AcuFacial® technique and confidently begin treating my acupuncture patients for their concerns about aging.

I. Cosmetic Facial Acupuncture-- History and Modern Application

Today acupuncture for appearance enhancement has become one of the fastest growing specialties. However, many people are unaware that Chinese Medical Cosmetology, or *Mei Rong*, has a well-documented and venerated history dating back thousands of years to the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC). Chinese medical physicians were employed to perform acupuncture and herbal medicine on Empresses and Emperors' concubines to enhance natural radiance, delay signs of aging, and maintain a youthful and lustrous appearance. Available at that time to only the wealthiest, this imperial secret was a holistic regimen designed to preserve beauty and maintain health.

The modern application of ancient *Mei Rong*, referred to today as *AcuFacial®*, *Constitutional Facial Acupuncture*, *Cosmetic Acupuncture*, *Cosmetic Facial Acupuncture*, or *Facial Rejuvenation Acupuncture*, has rapidly become a recognized and desired alternative or adjunct to well-established beauty-enhancing procedures such as Botox™, fillers, and surgery.

In fact, the results of a 2014 NCCAOM "Acupuncture Facial Rejuvenation Certification Needs Assessment Survey" revealed that based on acupuncturists responses, 62% of their patients inquired about acupuncture facial rejuvenation services for the purpose of appearance enhancement. At the time of that survey, cosmetic facial acupuncture was the third most popular specialty within the acupuncture profession. Since then, the ubiquity of this service has impacted the direction of new graduates as well as those whose practices are more seasoned.

II. Chinese Medicine and the Biomedical Approach to Cosmetic Facial Acupuncture

In keeping with the philosophy of *Mei Rong*, modern practitioners of cosmetic facial acupuncture view a disharmony in the Zang-Fu Organs, meridians, qi, blood, and fluids as the core of cosmetic-related complaints. An imbalance of any or all of these can be reflected on the face in the form of wrinkles, loss of muscle tone, decreased skin elasticity, skin problems (e.g., acne, rosacea), a withered, pale, dry appearance, and more. The etiology of these conditions is imbedded in the pattern recognition, diagnosis, and treatment of qi, blood, and fluids as they influence and are influenced by the elements, Organs, and meridians.

As practitioners of Chinese medicine, we know that patients' primary complaints are generally one of myriad disharmonies. As cosmetic facial acupuncturists we find that those presenting with allergies often have abdominal disturbances, loose stools, *as well as* loss of muscle tone in the cheeks and along the jaw, all of which can be related to Spleen Qi Deficiency with Dampness. Treating the Spleen can resolve allergies and address abdominal disorders such as loose stools, while *at the same time* restoring facial muscle tone. Patients presenting with menstrual problems related to Liver Blood Deficiency and Qi Stagnation commonly experience headaches, and difficulty sleeping, *along with* dry skin with forehead wrinkles. Treating the Liver, often the root of menstrual disorders, can relieve headaches, alleviate insomnia, hydrate skin, *and* soften forehead wrinkles. Patients with chronic low back pain related to Kidney Yang and Essence Deficiency may feel tired, chilled, and may *also* age prematurely. Treating the Kidney can resolve low back pain, reduce fatigue, increase internal warmth, *as well as* enhance overall facial appearance.

However, identifying disharmonies from a Chinese Medicine point of view is only the first step. Equally important is knowing how to address these imbalances from a biomedical perspective. Cosmetic facial acupuncture training entails recognizing visual subtleties in facial structure and shape while considering morphological changes that occur over time.

Physiological Changes Associated with Aging

Changes in Facial Architecture:

- Bone resorption
- Weakening ligaments
- Alterations in muscle shape and tone
- Breakdown and redistribution of subcutaneous fat and fascia

Changes in Skin:

- Decreased cell integrity
- Reduced cell turnover and repair
- Increased epidermal pigmentation
- Decreased production of collagen and elastin

Aging alters the balance, proportions, and symmetry of the face. Skeletal resorption of the head and face causes eye sockets to enlarge, the angle of the brow to drop, and the mandible to lengthen. Facial fat loss and redistribution leads to cheek flattening, thickening of the nasolabial folds, and a deflated frontal appearance. Facial muscle changes cause them to hyper and/or hypo extend. For example, the platysma muscle of the neck tightens and weakens creating rigid neck banding with a concurrent flaccidity producing loss of definition along the jawline and chin. Collagen and elastin depletion in the superficial tissue causes skin laxity, and epidermal wrinkling. Dermal collagen break down leads to skin pitting and crow's feet, laugh lines, dimpling particularly in the lower cheek and perioral area.

The following pictures illustrate the basic anatomical changes that occur over time:



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At Left:

Aging of the female face, as represented by an individual in her 20s (far left), in her 50s (center), and finally in her 70s (far right). The primary event of aging is the loss of bone, facial volume, and the resulting involution and eventual descent of soft tissues such as muscle, fascia, and retaining ligaments. Dark bone shadowing reflects skeletal resorption of the eye socket, malar area, nose and jaw line. Redistribution and loss of facial fat leads to facial hollowing, accentuated nasolabial fold and jawline fat pocketing.

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Therapeutic treatment results reside in skilled needling technique including appropriate angle and depth of insertion. Skin, superficial fascia, and adipose disharmonies are resolved when needling at a shallow angle into the integumentary tissue layer. Needling into the muscle at a medium angle restores superficial/deeper muscle and deep fascia integrity. To delay the signs of aging, needling through the deep fascia to the level of the periosteum is most effective.

Cosmetic facial acupuncturists must also learn to recognize and address patients' emotional and psychodynamic aging concerns. In our youth-driven culture, when faced with the realization that one is getting older and will eventually die, it is common to experience emotional instability and psychological upheaval. During this time, many turn to acupuncture to erase the visible signs of aging. The healing, however, lies in their deep seated yearning for self-realization, personal acceptance, and spiritual renewal.

Benefits of Cosmetic Facial Acupuncture

Enhanced Appearance:

- Reduction of fine lines
- Softening of deep wrinkles
- Lifting and toning of sagging muscles
- Evening of skin tone and texture
- Improved complexion
- Increased skin hydration/dewyness
- Increased circulation
- Improved lymphatic drainage in skin tissue

Improved Health:

- Regulation of Qi and Blood
- Balanced Meridians
- Harmonized Organ Systems
- Improved health, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing

III. Chinese Medicine and Biomedical Cosmetic Facial Acupuncture Treatment

In acupuncture school, students learn that treatment works best when the underlying root problem is correctly identified and treated in accordance with each patient's symptoms. Different patients presenting with similar branch "signs and symptoms" often require entirely unique approaches. Seasoned acupuncturists, and those trained in a specialized field of acupuncture, routinely draw upon a wide array of treatment modalities mastered from years of training and experience. Specialists in cosmetic facial acupuncture are trained to recognize the subtleties of the face and facial patterning, and integrate them with Eastern root/branch treatment and biomedical-oriented treatment strategies.

The following case studies illustrate examples in which 2 different patients present with cosmetic complaints. Upon examination, it is clear that the changes both wish to address are objectively similar:

- ***Wrinkles across the forehead***
- ***Nasolabial folds***
- ***Loss of jawline definition.***

However, although the branch complaints are the same for both patients, the underlying root patterns of disharmony are very different. In order to effect lasting changes for these patients, a proficient cosmetic facial acupuncturist will develop a treatment strategy to address the root cause of the branch complaints, and then tailor an approach uniquely suited to each case. In addition, biomedical interventions will be used to enhance the efficacy of acupuncture based treatment.

PATIENT 1: Female age 42

Busy professional with high stress corporate job

-----SUBJECTIVE -----

Chief Complaint:

"I hate these lines on my forehead-- especially between my eyebrows-- and these deep creases around my nose and mouth, and I also am noticing jowls. Sitting in front of the computer all day gives me a headache."

----- OBJECTIVE -----

Physical Exam:

- *Wrinkles across the forehead*
- *Nasolabial folds*
- *Loss of jawline definition*

Tongue: slightly pale with sticky, yellow coat

Pulse: wiry and slippery

Palpation: abdominal fullness and distension

Additional observations:

Neck tension and poor posture exacerbating nasolabial folds and loss of jawline definition.

----- ASSESSMENT-----

Patterns of Disharmony:

- *Stagnant Liver Qi*
- *Liver invading the Spleen*
- *Spleen Qi deficiency*

----- PLAN -----

TREATMENT:

Body acupuncture

Points to harmonize Liver qi and strengthen Spleen qi.

Auricular acupressure

Ear points for Liver, Spleen, face and forehead.

Gua Sha

Used to improve skin circulation, relax frontalis and corrugator muscles.

Facial acupuncture

Shallow insertion into the dermal layer into the frontalis and corrugator forehead creases.

Shallow and medium insertion into the SMAS region of the platysma muscle surrounding the neck. Additional points to relax sternocleidomastoid muscle and improve posture.

Medium and deeper insertion into the deep fascia region of the midface.

Homecare recommendations:

Touch+Glow wand applied to base of neck and orbicularis oculi area and gentle massage to relax upper face region.

Lifestyle modifications, including dietary and daily routine recommendations and ergonomic positioning while sitting at the computer.

OUTCOME:

After 3 weekly treatments, this patient's forehead appeared more relaxed, wrinkles significantly diminished, softening of nasolabial fold and improved jawline definition. She no longer had headaches.

Patient 2: Female age 54

Wife and mother of 3 children

-----SUBJECTIVE-----

Chief Complaint:

"Every time I look in the mirror, all I see are wrinkles across my forehead. My face sags. I have creases between my nose and mouth. My once sculpted jawline is gone. I'm getting hot flashes at night and can't sleep. I feel anxious, afraid, old, and miserable."

-----OBJECTIVE-----

Physical Exam:

- *Wrinkles across the forehead*
- *Nasolabial folds*
- *Loss of jawline definition*

Tongue: thin and dry with red tip

Pulse: thin and rapid

Palpation: tenderness in the lumbar region

Additional observations:

Signs of aging related common anatomical changes, including loss of collagen in perioral area), redistribution and loss of fat in malar area, hypo and hyperextension of muscles in the mid-face, lower face, and neck.

-----ASSESSMENT-----

Patterns of Disharmony:

- *Kidney Yin deficiency*
- *Kidney-Heart Disharmony*

----- PLAN -----

TREATMENT:

Body acupuncture

Points to tonify Kidney Yin, calm shen, and restore Kidney-Heart harmony.

Auricular acupressure

Ear points for Kidney, Heart, face, and Shen.

Face cupping

To invigorate skin circulation.

Facial acupuncture

Shallow needling onto the dermal layer of forehead.

Medium depth needling of mid and lower face and neck.

Deep needling around temple, forehead, and jawline to delay orbital, malar, and mandibular bone resorption.

Western Ancillary Methods

Microcurrent (500uA/0.3Hz) to relax tight muscles and improve tone of lax muscles.

Light Emitting Diode (LED) to enhance production of healthy collagen and elastin.

Homecare Recommendations:

Dermarolling (0.25mm) to improve skin integrity and enhance production of collagen and elastin.

OUTCOME:

After 6 sessions, this patient's appearance had significantly improved. Frontalis muscles appeared more relaxed, wrinkle creasing across the forehead diminished, cheek muscles appeared lifted, and jawline more sculpted. Patient stated she looked and felt 10 years younger. Her anxiety about aging was greatly reduced. She also noted that not only had appearance changed her overall attitude about the aging process was changing as well.

IV. Education and Practice Building

With the help of internet technology, today's patients are more educated and inquisitive. They ask more questions, demand informed answers, and expect a higher level of quality care. They need to feel confident that their healthcare professional is trained and proficient in their treatment area of concern. Knowing that their provider is competent in the problem for which they are being treated gives them a sense of personal safety and security.

As the field of acupuncture gains a more respected and integrated role in today's modern healthcare system, our need to be responsible practitioners has never been more crucial. As acupuncturists, it is our responsibility to present ourselves in the manner that we want to be acknowledged. This includes how we represent ourselves, as well as how we educate ourselves. Although intention is of utmost importance, we know that acupuncture cannot be learned by reading about it or simply taking an abbreviated course. This is particularly true when considering yourself a specialist of any given field. The key to a rewarding and financially successful practice is rooted in a proficiency in clinical skills yielding positive treatment outcomes. Such achievement relies on comprehensive post-graduate study entailing competency-based training in a diversity of specialty modalities with the intention of mastering an area of expertise.

As a practitioner of cosmetic facial acupuncture for over 26 years, mastery of my specialized field comes with a lifetime of study, hard work, and perseverance. It never stops as to this day I am still learning. My research, patients, and students are my teachers. Pursuing my passion has been and continues to be a long and extraordinary journey.

About Shellie Goldstein

Shellie Goldstein, M.S., L.Ac., is the author of *Your Best Face Now: Look Younger in 20 Days with the Do-It-Yourself Acupressure FaceLift* (Avery Press 2012), creator of *Touch+Glow: The Natural Acupressure Facelift Kit*, numerous distance learning continuing education courses, and founder of the Advanced Cosmetic Facial Acupuncture Mentorship and Training Program.

About Audrey Greenfield

Audrey Greenfield, M.D., L.Ac., has extensive knowledge in both western and eastern medicine. With a background in scientific research, her passion is to bring credibility to acupuncture by helping to build its evidence base. Audrey is published in peer-reviewed journals, including the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. She recently conducted a pilot study to quantitate the effects of acupressure on health and well-being.

For additional information about Shellie, her book, kit, courses, and training program contact:

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