

WRINKLE FREE

Move over Botox and anti-ageing creams, the well-heeled now take hormones to get younger from within

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Soon after she turned 40, Kamal Doshi found herself slowing down. The busy interior designer who once used to spring from bed to get dressed for work every morning now lacked the inspiration to even move a finger in the first hour after waking up. She felt bloated, irritable and often forgot the names of her domestic help and acquaintances. Alarmed, the Civil Lines resident consulted many doctors but they couldn't zero in on the cause. Her despair only increased after she visited a dentist last year, complaining of teeth-chattering and pain in the gums. The dentist said her gums were receding and casually called it a sign of ageing, adding that it was happening early in her case. "I was shocked...I was in my 40s, not 60s. How could I be ageing?" said the 45-year-old mother-of-two. Last year, Doshi finally found a remedy to turn back the clock and is now "happier, livelier, and more active".

Doshi has not found the fountain of youth. She has turned to anti-ageing medicine: a new, albeit controversial, system of medicine that aims to make one younger "from within", primarily by boosting hormone levels (see box).

A growing number of well-heeled urban Indians are taking this new-age therapy, be it for looking younger, improving their overall health or for specific concerns like obesity and hypothyroidism. Unlike anti-wrinkle creams and Botox that work on the appearance, anti-ageing medicine (AAM) claims to beat age-related decline of the entire body, including organs, by using a combination of lifestyle modification, anti-oxidants and most importantly, Bio-identical Hormone Replacement Therapy (BHRT).

Anti-ageing medicine practitioners believe that we age because our hormones decline. They, therefore, artificially replace hormones to slow down the ageing process which is marked by grey hair, wrinkles, memory lapses, lack of energy, decreased libido, among other symptoms. "Ageing is inevitable but we can now delay the process to maintain youthful looks and productivity," claims Mumbai-based anti-ageing specialist Dr Deepak Chaturvedi.

Though there is little scientific evidence

to prove the efficacy of anti-ageing medicine, the treatment (first introduced in the US in 1993) has become much sought after in Western countries. Popular talk show host Oprah Winfrey swears by BHRT's benefits and has been promoting it on her show. AAM made its way to India three years ago with doctors from abroad tying up with physicians here. Several clinics in Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore and Hyderabad and even one in Rajkot are now offering the treatment.

FROM TEENAGERS TO AN OCTOGENARIAN GOLFER

Plastic surgeon Dr Lokesh Kumar, who heads the Delhi Aesthetic Clinic at Greater Kailash II, added AAM to his centre's menu, alongside lip-enhancements and nose reshaping, three months ago. At a time when even septuagenarians colour their hair instead of showing off their grey, it comes as no surprise that AAM has become popular. More than 80 people have already enrolled for the treatment at his south Delhi clinic. Two specialised anti-ageing clinics in Mumbai — AMAYA in Andheri and Santacruz and Yuvanese Juhu — have treated 1,500 and 600 individuals, respectively. The demand for this new-age therapy is comparatively less at centres in Hyderabad and Bangalore but the doctors foresee a spurt in clients. "There was no awareness about anti-ageing when we started offering the treatment two years back. But now eight to 10 people walk in every week with enquiries," said Dr Praveen Saxena, who heads the Centre for Progressive Medicine in Hyderabad.

AAM clinics across the country say that most patients belong to the 35 to 55 age bracket though younger people are opting for it as well. Dr Chaturvedi, who runs AMAYA, has treated an 18-year-old male "whose energy level was as low as a 40-year-old because of obesity." Yuvanese's Dr Sunita Banerji, on the other hand, recently put her 84-year-old father on AAM. "He just won a golf championship. He is agile, alert and walks fast despite his age," she said. The treatment seems to have become a hit in B-Town where good looks and stamina are essential for survival. At Yuvanese, 40 per cent of clients are from the film and television industry. Other AAM 'patients' include rich businessmen, middle-class professionals and housewives. Encouraged by the response, AMAYA and Yuvanese plan to start centres in Ahmedabad, Chennai, Chandigarh and Kolkata.

IS IT REALLY SAFE?

Experts say that AAM's reliance on BHRT makes it controversial. "There is no clear proof that BHRT is superior to or safer than



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What is Anti-Ageing Medicine?

Anti-ageing medicine aims to prevent or reverse age-related decline and improve the quality of life. This is done by a combination of lifestyle modification, exercise, anti-oxidants and, most

importantly, artificially boosting hormone levels. Hormones are chemicals that regulate the activities of our cells and organs. Our body produces many hormones to carry out normal functioning. However, after the age of 40, hormone levels

start declining in both men and women. Anti-ageing specialists put their patients through tests to check the hormone levels and then start corrective therapy. While some hormones like testosterone and progesterone are in the form of creams that have to be rubbed on the arms, others are oral tablets. The 'holistic' treatment also includes vitamin/mineral supplements, diet and exercise.

conventional hormone replacement therapy, which itself is controversial," said Dr Amrish Mithal, who heads the endocrinology division at Medanta-The Medcity, Gurgaon. Doctors used to put post-menopausal women on oestrogen hormone in the past but have of late stopped prescribing it unless absolutely essential as studies have shown that it increases the risk of breast cancer. "It was only after using hormone replacement for 40 to 50 years that doctors realised it is not safe. BHRT is marketed in a way that gives the impression that it is completely safe but the truth is that we don't know yet," Dr Mithal warned.

AAM specialists, however, claim that bio-identical hormones are derived from natural sources like yam and soy plants. Unlike synthetic ones that were used earlier, they have no major side effects. Minor side effects such as acne or facial hair growth are reported at clinics but doctors say they can be managed. "Women who are given oestrogen may notice a change in their menstrual cycle, the ones who are given progesterone sometimes experience vaginal dryness and men who are given testosterone may lose some hair or their prostate may get enlarged," said Dr Chaturvedi. "But if we administer the right dose and take the right precautions, these can be avoided."

While most doctors agree that it is beneficial to give hormones to patients with a clear deficiency, they are not quite convinced by their use for general well-being and anti ageing. No large-scale and long-term studies have been conducted to prove the efficacy of BHRT in stopping or reversing the process of ageing.

Psychologists are also concerned about the growing obsession with looking young. "The trend of staying fit and looking young is good as long as it does not turn into an obsession. It is worrisome when a 20-year-old

goes for a face correction or anti-ageing medicine. Colouring one's hair or going for a facial is acceptable but I don't know how healthy it is to interfere with our hormones and the body's natural processes," said Mumbai-based psychiatrist Dr Anjali Chhabria, warning that people are not thinking about the possible long term repercussions.

COST NO BAR

But the lack of scientific evidence and the steep cost — roughly between Rs 5,000 and Rs 8,000 per month — has not discouraged people from going for AAM. Tushar Banerji, a marketing professional with a Mumbai-based firm, reckons the Rs 60,000 he spent on AAM over the past year was worth every penny. "I am 39, but I feel and look like a 30-year-old now," gushed Banerji who was suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome. The Mira Road resident was overweight and constantly tired. "My energy level had become so low, I had to drag myself to work and never played with my five-year-old son when I got home," he recounted. Based on his anti-ageing prescription, Banerji started rubbing a hormone-

laced cream on his wrist, woke up at 6 am for a walk and stuck to home-cooked food. Ten months down the line, he says he has lost eight kilos, his hair has stopped falling and he can even muster up energy for a swim, something he had not done in a decade.

Though there is little scientific evidence to prove anti-ageing medicine's efficacy, the treatment has become much sought after in the West. Popular talk show host Oprah Winfrey swears by BHRT's benefits and has been promoting it on her show

FAD OR FUTURE?

Practitioners say that AAM has become the need of the hour due to both increase in life expectancy and pre-mature ageing. "People are living longer these days but our hormone levels start dropping post 40 when our reproductive function is over. These days, the process is kicking in even sooner so we spend a major part of our life on low hormones and this has affected its quality," said Dr Banerji. She blamed a fast-paced lifestyle, stress, chronic conditions like obesity and diabetes as well as poor nutrition for accelerating the ageing process. Nearly 75 per cent of patients who are put through tests turn out to have a hormonal imbalance, according to practitioners. "Cows are given hormone injections to increase milk production so we are bombarded with oestrogen through the milk we drink and the mineral content in vegetables has become negligible. All this is playing havoc with our health," said Dr Banerji.

Independent experts like Dr Mithal, however, consider the therapy a fad. "It is a grey zone of science and we should not recommend it till there is clear evidence of its benefits," he said. Despite criticism, AAM practitioners remain upbeat about its potential. Ronald Klatz, the president of the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine was quoted by the New York Times as saying, "We the leaders of the Anti-Aging movement will help to usher in a new modern age for humanity: The Ageless Society." As the debate rages around AAM, only time will perhaps tell whether Klatz is right or wrong. ■

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