

Are Your Stem Cells the Ultimate Skin Cream?

Mixing your stem cells into skin care is the newest wrinkle-erasing strategy. We test it out.

By Alex Kuczynski



The good news: I wasn't fat. The bad news: I wasn't fat. In order to collect enough fat tissue to extract my stem cells—the politically combustible wonder cells capable of regenerating damaged tissue and organs—the surgeon would have to do mini liposuction in not one but four places.

So Doug Steinbrech, a New York plastic surgeon, sucked and snorkeled away, siphoning two ounces of my fat into a couple of plastic bags that looked, by the end of the appointment, as if they were stuffed with Chef Boyardee leftovers. Packed into a cooler, my fat went via a medical courier truck to Personal Cell Sciences, a New Jersey company that last year announced a customized skin-care line for clients who wouldn't mind

depositing their stem cells (a onetime procedure costing an average of \$1,500, depending on which plastic surgeon you use) and paying a hefty monthly fee (\$1,500) for refills of all three products that promise younger-looking skin. After Steinbrech, a surgeon approved to do the procedure for Personal Cell Sciences, harvested the fat, the company culled stem cells from the rest of the "excess material" (the medical nickname for the blood and muck and bacteria that no one wants to use), then cultured them in a growth solution to create a tailored skin-care line, U Autologous. The rest were stored for future use, not necessarily cosmetic. (Stem cells received much press attention last year, when they were used to create a new windpipe for a cancer patient in Stockholm.)

Autologous fat transfer—fat that comes from your own body rather than from a donor or an animal source—has been popular for years; dermatologists harvest fat from some chubby spot on the tush and inject, or transfer, it into the face. But this was the first I had heard of using one's own stem cells to create a topical skin-care regimen that claims to stimulate the skin's natural healing abilities.

A sleek box marked with a giant glossy thumbprint arrived at my house from Personal Cell Sciences two weeks later. Inside were eye cream, firming serum, and moisturizer, all marked ADULT STEM CELL and ALEX KUCZYNSKI. I was to use each of them twice a day.

For the next two months, I methodically swabbed my stem cells—in their bath of cytokines (proteins that act as cell messengers) and growth factors—onto my face. Because the products had come at such a high price (fat removal, stitches, bruising, dollars) and had the perceived strength of science behind them, I felt privileged to use them and believed they must be doing something amazing. I was motivated to slather them on day and night.

John Arnone, founder and CEO of Personal Cell Sciences, told me that he considers wrinkles and lines the "wounds" of aging. "What are wrinkles if not a wound?" he asked me. "Was that wrinkle there 20 years ago? No. It's an injury. I'd like to repair it." The clinical data impressed me. Researchers reported an improvement in skin texture for 95 percent of users in four weeks, a visible reduction in fine lines for 81 percent, and a generally more youthful appearance for 87 percent. But as I read more carefully, I was skeptical: The sample included just 19 patients.

Some dermatologists are also doubtful. Debra Jaliman, a New York dermatologist, says, "If you're going to spend that kind of money, why not have a procedure where you're going to actually see the difference?" She tallied up all the treatments she could provide for \$1,500 or \$3,000 (fillers, Botox, and a laser treatment).

Did it work for me? Yes and no. The regimen counsels a strict application of the products morning and night, which is more than I apply any moisturizer. Did it reduce my fine lines and wrinkles? Sure. Age spots, redness, and discoloration? Not so much. But I am relieved that my healthy adult stem cells are sitting in a freezer somewhere (stored by Personal Cell Sciences's partner company for as long as I remain a client of PCS), waiting for me, very patient about their chances to build a bone or reconstruct an organ for me someday in the distant future.

Photo Credit: Hiro; Kelly Stewart, New York, 1994