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SKIN DEEP

Putting 'You Look Tired' to Rest

By [KATIE ZEZIMA](#)

IRY CHANG is sick of people telling her she looks exhausted. She gets enough sleep, but the dark circles under her eyes still elicit stares and make her look much older than her 25 years.

“Anyone who has dark circles knows how it feels,” said Ms. Chang, who started www.mydarkcirclesblog.com, which posts articles and Web links about the latest remedies and clinical treatments for dark circles. “They’re quite annoying. When I look in the mirror, all I see is someone who looks very tired.”

Ms. Chang has occasionally used concealer on the discoloration. But now that dozens of beauty companies, including Clinique and Shiseido, make potions to treat dark circles and not just mask them, she hopes like so many others to be able to look refreshed without using makeup.

In recent years, the drumbeat against under-eye circles has grown louder.

“Dark circles around the eyes can be unsightly,” declares one advertisement for a Medik8 eye cream. An advertisement for Hylexin cream features a pale model with black stripes under her eyes, like a football player, for dramatic effect. And just in case you think you are overreacting, the ad reinforces the notion that

dark circles are indeed a flagrant shortcoming.

“It has become one of our top imperatives now to address dark circles,” said Tom Mammone, the executive director of research and development for .

Roughly 53 percent of the 13,000 Clinique users surveyed by the company in 2006 cited under-eye circles and puffiness as their No. 1 beauty concern.

“We were really shocked,” said Dr. Mammone, who has a Ph.D in molecular and cellular biology. “We knew many of our people in distribution and sales suggested that it was a concern, but we didn’t really know until the survey that it is a major issue.”

Sephora now sells more than 50 products designed to specifically treat under-eye circles, said Stacy Baker, the chain’s editorial director.

Sales of anti-aging skin care treatments, which include products designed to get rid of dark circles, increased to \$1.08 billion in 2006, up from \$588 million annually in 2001, according to Mintel, a market research firm. No one specifically tracks the market for dark-circle remedies.

Taming dark circles is tricky.

“There are a lot of factors that contribute to quote-unquote dark circles,” said Dr. Diane Berson, an assistant professor of

dermatology at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University in Manhattan. “It’s a combination of [heredity](#) and [genetics](#).”

Most people think dark circles are a telltale sign of tiredness, or the unsightly evidence of a binge involving one too many margaritas. That is true to a certain extent, as fatigue makes skin dull, and drinking alcohol dehydrates and thins the skin.

But the most likely culprit causing chronic dark circles, dermatologists say, is excess pigmentation in the skin. Dark circles are prevalent on all skin colors and types, but they especially trouble African-Americans, Southeast Asians and Southern Italians. Beach bunnies should note: sun exposure exacerbates dark circles.

Dilated blood vessels that sit close to the thin under-eye skin are another cause, doctors said. And airborne allergens, which cause blood to pool in the vessels under the skin, can worsen their appearance, said Dr. John A. Persing, a professor and the chief of [plastic surgery](#) at the [Yale University](#) School of Medicine.

(Treatment for these sufferers may be as simple as an [antihistamine](#) pill.)

Aging, which causes skin to thin, can darken the eye area, as can certain medications such as [birth control](#) pills, which can dilate blood vessels.

The problem is that few, if any, of the creams on the market are

formulated for people with excess pigmentation or dilated veins.

“Multiple creams are available, however it is unclear how effective they are,” Dr. Persing said.

For people who aren't sure why they have dark circles, he recommends topical products that contain a plumping agent or alpha-hydroxy acids, which can thicken the skin, or [vitamins C and K](#), which can inflame skin and add volume.

But considering the glut of products on the market with a variety of active ingredients, Dr. Persing said, “If there are that many of them available, that usually means they're not terribly successful.”

Clinique uses whey protein in its All About Eyes Rich cream (\$27.50), because it increases collagen production, said Dr. Mammone.

But in independent medical research, whey protein has not been proved to plump up skin. (Clinique is also experimenting with various peptides, or linked amino acids, to treat dark circles.)

Shiseido White Lucent Brightening Eye Treatment (\$50) uses [vitamin C](#), which minimizes melanin, and chestnut rose extract, which the company says thickens skin's texture, said Blair Bloom, the company's executive director of education and training.

For more than 12 years, a kind of [laser surgery](#) that resurfaces skin and destroys pigment cells was the only recourse for those

bothered by under-eye discoloration. But it was painful and took weeks to heal. Even though newer laser technology tackles less surface at a time, ample recovery time is still needed.

So in the last three years, plumping up the area under the eyes with injections of off-label fillers like Restylane and Juvéderm has become a popular alternative for people who want little downtime.

Plastic surgeons and dermatologists say the fillers help cover up melanin or the blood vessels that peek through thin skin. A round of injections, which lasts about six months, costs \$500 to \$800.

Patients have long complained about dark circles, but aside from surgery, there used to be few options, said Dr. Z. Paul Lorenc, a Manhattan plastic surgeon who participated in clinical trials for the filler Restylane. These days, he estimated that 20 percent of his patients ask about fillers for their dark circles.

Fillers are not risk-free. Side effects can include bruising, [swelling](#) and [allergic reactions](#).

Still, the [Food and Drug Administration](#) received only 45 reports of adverse effects from having fillers injected in the eye area, including nodule formation and bruising, from January 2003 to October 2007, said Peper Long, a spokeswoman.

Neither Restylane and Juvéderm were specifically approved by the F.D.A. to treat under-eye circles, so patients should be

cautious, Ms. Long wrote in an e-mail message. (Both were approved to fill facial [wrinkles](#).)

Patients risk bumps and lumps, which may last anywhere from a few weeks to a year, from injections in the under-eye area because the skin is so thin, Dr. Berson and Dr. Persing both said.

“It’s hard to get a smooth contour with injections,” Dr. Persing added.

Although Annette Pucci, 48, of Queens, chalks up her the dark circles under her eyes to genetics, she still tried “every cream in the world,” including eye formulations by Chanel and Lancôme.

“I’d pay a fortune for this stuff and I didn’t really see a difference — ever,” she said. “It was horrible. I always felt like I looked tired all the time or like I was crying.”

After a friend mentioned she was going to use fillers to treat her dark circles, Ms. Pucci also had Restylane injections, in November. “I was a little skeptical,” she said.

But Ms. Pucci said her circles have disappeared, all with little downtime. “I just put on an ice pack and went to my son’s baseball game that night,” said Ms. Pucci, one of Dr. Lorenc’s patients.

“I’m going to be 49 in August and now people ask me if I’m in my 30s,” she said.

One could argue that dark circles are yet another problem foisted into the spotlight by beauty companies with profit margins in mind. But considering the attention that discoloration in the eye area attracts compared with, say, an off-color elbow patch, perhaps being self-conscious about dark circles can be forgiven.

“Since I’m in sales and in front of clients, I want to look like I’m polished,” said Alison Butler, 32, a sales director from Boston.

But none of the countless creams she has tried have vanquished her dark circles, she said. Neither has staying hydrated.

Still, Ms. Butler could not help buying a \$53 eye serum from Caudalíe.

“I’m willing to pay a little more and be a little more selective,” she said, “since I’ve tried so many in the past.”