

SKIN DEEP

Got Crow's-Feet? Call the Downward Dog



Shiho Fukada for The New York Times

SAY AH Students in the Revita-Yoga class, a combination of yoga and facial exercises, at the New York Health & Racquet Club.

By ALIX STRAUSS
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Correction Appended

FOR a Friday evening, the small, intimate workout room at the New York Health & Racquet Club on East 57th Street was comfortably full. A dozen people sat, their chins pointed toward the ceiling, their lips puckered as if preparing for a kiss.

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Shiho Fukada for The New York Times
Annelise Hagen leads the class.

Later, they took their index and middle fingers and tapped their mouths five times, with the hope of increasing lip fullness and color. If done each day, they were told, it would be just as if they had been injected with collagen.

"The resistance is what firms the muscles," Annelise Hagen, the teacher, said of Revita-Yoga, which combines yoga and facial exercises and is billed as a way to combat frown lines, wrinkles and sagging. "Each pose, stretch or exercise is designed to relax the muscles and release the patterns people unconsciously etch into their skin."

Want to sculpture and narrow your nose? Alternate breathing out of each nostril, Revita-Yoga teaches. Have crow's-feet? Open the eyes wide to smooth the lines. As

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Shiho Fukada for The New York Times

pale as the winter sky? A dose of downward dog can add color to the complexion while oxygenating the skin.

In an era when aging is treated as a disease and yoga is often touted as a cure-all, it is hardly surprising to see people combining the two. Classes are sprouting up all over the United States and so are books, marketed to the portion of the population that wants the benefits of the knife and the needle without the costs or the risks.

That it works is unlikely, say doctors who specialize in skin or facial physiology. But it does relax practitioners while playing into their desire to do something about perceived flaws in their skin.

“People want a healthy alternative to looking good without artificial substance,” said Ms. Hagen, a former actress whose book, “The Yoga Face,” is to be published this August by Avery, the health and wellness division of Penguin. “And they want to be in control of their appearance rather than relegating it to an authority. I’m teaching my students to consciously release muscles rather than paralyzing them, which is what Botox does.”



Shiho Fukada for The New York Times

The idea of merging exercise and beauty is not new. Beauty magazines have long carried how-to articles on firming up the face. But the concept seems to have become imbued

with new energy in the last year.

Frownies and jowlies are under attack at the Lake Austin Spa Resort in Austin, Texas, where guests are led through a series of 23 facial movements meant to release facial tension, lift droopy mouth corners and iron forehead wrinkles.

The Kapiolani Health Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, has six two-hour sessions designed to create “balanced facial symmetry” while revitalizing and rejuvenating skin.

Gary Sikorski, who is certified in yoga facial toning, gives his Happy Face workshop in the Atlanta area. In a phone interview, Mr. Sikorski sounded, well, quite happy. He had just seen a graduate of his course, and, he said, “she had been practicing a lot on her own, and she looked amazing! The corners of her mouth were turned up, she looked younger and was absolutely glowing.”

The latest six-session series, he said, drew 25 seekers of his guidance for stimulating 57 muscles in the face, neck and scalp. Mr. Sikorski sent them home with a 33-page booklet, a CD and fact sheets on nutrition and vitamins. “Folks are realizing the face has muscles and that there’s a substitute to plastic surgery that costs less and can achieve similar results,” he said.

Much less: At \$250, his class is a bargain when compared with a laser peel, which runs around \$600.

The publishing industry has been quick to sit up straight, breathe deeply and take notice. Besides Ms. Hagen’s book, there is “The Yoga Facelift,” by Marie-Véronique Nadeau, coming out next month. Published by Red Wheel Weiser/Conari Presso, it will have a first printing of 15,000 — large for a small publisher in San Francisco.



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“Plastic surgery can leave people looking like waxed fruit and doesn’t address long-term sagging,” said Ms. Nadeau, 59, whose workshops at Elephant Pharmacy, an alternative pharmacy chain in the Bay Area of Northern California, draw a standing-room-only crowd. “For some reason we exercise every part of our body but ignore everything from the collarbone up.”

Maryann Donner, the group fitness director at New York Health & Racquet, said Ms. Hagen’s Revita-Yoga class is part of another trend she has observed while organizing the 600 classes the chain’s 10 gyms offer each week. “Right now the trend in classes is fusion, the bringing of two worlds together,” Ms. Donner said.

For Revita-Yoga, “Annelise took her knowledge of facial exercises from her acting background and fused it with her yoga teachings,” Ms. Donner said. “When she came to me last year with the idea, I fell in love with it immediately.”

The class was called Yo-Tox until the folks from Botox had other thoughts. The club soon changed the name.

But is there any merit to these exercises, and will there ever be a substitute for freezing a muscle?

“Nothing is going to have a lasting benefit like Botox or filler or collagen injections,” said Dr. Dennis Gross, a Midtown Manhattan dermatologist, the author of “Your Future Face” and the creator of a skin-care line. But there are short-term improvements, he said.

“Facial stretches and yoga temporarily reduce the neurological impulses associated with stress and the grimaces that lead to the lines in your forehead,” he said. “The plumping of your lips is more a massage and only adds color for a few minutes.”

And once the foot hits the pavement during rush hour, or the BlackBerry is back in hand, the face automatically tenses up, and the benefits of deep breaths and relaxation wear off.

“If you already have a wrinkle or a frown line, relaxation isn’t going to erase that,” said Dr. Richard Elias, an oral and maxillo-facial surgeon on the Upper East Side.

On the other hand, Dr. Elias said, there is no physical downside to facial workouts. And, he added, the exercises might help with prevention.

“Jowls, sagging under the neck, creases at the mouth, are all signs of aging that most probably will not be helped by a yoga class,” he said. “If you make the muscles in your face bigger it will not make sagging skin tougher or tighter, nor will it help remove fatty deposits. Only a face-lift can do that. When you do a face-lift, you’re removing fat and loose skin, and pulling some skin back.”

Some yoga gurus are skeptical, too.

“We’ve not discovered the fountain of youth, though people are always trying to obtain it,” said Rodney Yee of East Hampton, N.Y., a well-known yoga instructor, who was unaware these programs existed. “Yoga will add radiance to your face and relax you, which will make you look younger, but to just focus on the face is too specific and sounds more like a marketing ploy.”

Marketing ploy or not, devotees don’t seem to care. This is, after all, a face-conscious nation.

“I know I’d see better results if I practiced the exercises at home,” said Anne Starr, a banker who has taken the Revita-Yoga class for more than a year. “The title intrigued me, and I love the anti-aging qualities the class offers. The fact that I’m working muscles I’m

not conscious of, paired with the yoga techniques, makes me feel I'm doing something really beneficial for my face and body."

As the Friday class ended and members were putting away their mats, smiles were on their faces, a bounce was in their step and their cheeks were flushed with color.

"When we smile in a relaxed, natural way without crinkling our eyes, we tone and eliminate wrinkles," Ms. Hagen said as she waved goodbye to several students. "I don't teach a smiling exercise since it happens naturally when the session ends."

Correction: April 5, 2007

An article last week comparing stretching classes misspelled the given name of an instructor who teaches active isolated stretching. She is Susana Picheny, not Susan.

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