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In Case of the Falling Face, Gravity Is Acquitted

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Val Lambros

Facial features stay in place over time, suggesting that a loss of volume, not sagging skin, is the enemy of youth.

By ANAHAD O'CONNOR

Published: October 26, 2004

Pull up your cheeks and you may briefly remove some years from that reflection in the mirror. But is it accurate to blame the forces of gravity for the havoc that aging wreaks on youthful features? Probably not.

A new study suggests that gravity's role in aging has been exaggerated, and that the downward migration of facial skin over time is merely an illusion. The real culprit, the study found, is the loss of volume underneath the skin.

"People assume that the face falls because when you pull back on the cheeks everything looks better," said Dr. Val Lambros, a plastic surgeon in California and the author of the new study, which has not yet been published. "If you look closely you can see that different points on the face really don't move that much."

Dr. Lambros presented the report at a conference of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons in Philadelphia this month. He based his findings on comparisons of photographs of people taken at different points in their lives. Early and recent pictures had to be perfectly aligned, allowing him to track the movement of moles, wrinkles and other facial landmarks.

Surprisingly, he said, only a few features shifted over time. The subjects' brows fell

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slightly and their upper lips thinned. Their jowls became more prominent, but they expanded rather than dropped. Every other feature in the photographs remained perfectly still.

What actually robs people of their youthful appearances, Dr. Lambros discovered, is something called deflation. "It's the loss of subcutaneous fat and volume," he said. "It's a deflation of the soft tissue, which you can clearly see in the brow."

Other surgeons seem to have noticed this as well. In recent years, more and more plastic surgeons have started using fat injections under the skin to fill out the face rather than stretch it. But the old-fashioned face-lift is not expected to disappear anytime soon. Simply "pumping up" a face will not add youth, Dr. Lambros said. In most cases, the procedure is more complicated.

"Plastic surgery is not an art form; it's a craft," Dr. Lambros said. "You have to read the face, and see where you need to add and where you might need to pull a bit. You have to do a little of this and a little of that. When you spend time on the details, you get better results."

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