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Age before beauty

With life expectancy soaring, women are reaching for new treatments to stop the outward signs of aging — swapping plastic surgery for diets, creams and a little bit of filler and Botox.

Here, a 'saggy-faced' mother of three visits the skin doctor to the stars in a surprising search for eternal youth

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On a cold and wet day in what passes for spring this year, I find myself standing on the doorstep of a neat bungalow in Finchley, north London. Cars rush by; I am lashed by rain. I am here for an appointment with Neetu Nirdosh, self-styled celebrity skin doctor and one of the UK's newest, most inventive anti-aging gurus. Skin-care products and supplements bear her brand name, along with a radical approach to the business of growing older. Nirdosh believes that aging is a disease like any other, and that it should be treated as such. Furthermore, she believes that she has the knowledge and the means to do so, and has founded an empire on both. She wants to cure us — and specifically me — of aging.

I have met Nirdosh before. In February I attended an anti-aging boot camp in Kent, southeast England, which was so exhausting that I came back looking 20 years older. This, however, was not the fault of Nirdosh, who seemed like a source of comfort and a voice of reason among the other, less palatable aspects of the camp. There had been a power play between the hard-line organizers, who wanted us out on drills every second of the day, and Nirdosh, who tended towards the benefits of pampering baths and an hour of meditation over yomping up hills carrying a heavy metal pole.

I'd found Nirdosh and her theories intriguing. In fact, I find the whole issue of anti-aging intriguing. As someone who has never cared much about how I look, I have recently found myself drawn towards various creams and serums, the so-called "elixirs" of youth. The fear of aging is upon me and yet I am not quite sure why. When I look in the mirror I want to see me, but maybe a younger version of me.

Nirdosh herself is 34 and looks a decade younger. She is small and sinewy, with big eyes and the body of a child.

When I first met her, she told me that when she was a child her beautician mother had been a huge influence. She made sure that almost everything her daughter ate or drank was designed to improve her skin. "My school lunch box was crazy: full of tomatoes, half a cucumber, carrots and a pint of milk." Nirdosh went to medical school and became absorbed by science and its relationship with beauty. She reached the conclusion that youth could be prolonged by changing the hormonal chemistry within our bodies. "Aging is a disease that produces symptoms just like heart disease," she said as she rubbed a dollop of her face cream on my chin one night at the boot camp. "So we should have a refined preventative treatment protocol as we do with other diseases."

Nirdosh believes she discovered the key to preventing aging by using herself as a guinea pig. "At med school I wasn't eating properly," she recalls. "I was drinking stimulants to remain awake; I wasn't exercising. I noticed my hair was becoming thinner. I gained loads of weight, became out of shape and felt lethargic. My skin became

blotchy and I had fine lines and deep bags. I was suffering from premature aging, and that was the pivotal moment, when I put my plan in to action. Within weeks I had systematically and purposefully reversed aging." The central idea of her method is to "kick-start" our hormones, specifically attacking the human growth hormone that causes our bodies to suffer old age, including wrinkly skin, bone weakness, muscle loss, fat accumulation and collagen breakdown. Nirdosh believes that a combination of diet, exercise, supplements and treatments will boost anti-aging hormones and rectify the damage caused.

None of this is particularly revolutionary. When researching anti-aging, the same things come up again and again — good diet, correct BMI, exercise, sleep, supplements. It is what is known as living "a healthy lifestyle." The American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine, a US-registered non-profit organization, believes that a "transformation" can be produced by a combination of interventions, which include hormones, antioxidants, lifestyle modifications and exercise. A 2002 presentation produced by osteopathic physician and founder member Ronald Klitz highlights many widely recommended interventions to maintain health in old age, such as staying slim, avoiding smoking, taking regular exercise, maintaining an active social and sex life, continued mental stimulation, avoiding stress, having a healthy diet, and moderate alcohol consumption. He argues that the application of this set of interventions can produce "practical immortality," which are human life spans in excess of 150 years.

However, what seems to make Nirdosh special is that she has many high-profile clients who all seem to swear by it. There are, of course, other anti-aging experts but they tend to stick within the remit of face creams and serums — Nirdosh attacks aging as a whole.

When I got back from the camp, I found myself wondering what she could do for me. I am 43. I feel tired all the time, my energy is low, and every morning when I wake up and look in the mirror my face looks saggy. It takes an age to spring back to life, if at all. This had never bothered me — until Nirdosh told me she could revolutionize my life. Which is why I am standing outside her Finchley home and clinic.

Nirdosh says she first needs to determine how quickly I am aging. I stand on some scales; Nirdosh presses various buttons and takes readings. She tells me she is checking my weight, my bone density and other indicators. I then sit on a chair while she runs a white flashing stick with a blue light in it over my face. She makes endless notes on a page.

"The bad news is you are aging more rapidly than you should be," she says eventually. "The good news I can help you reverse this."

Nirdosh takes me through her program. While following her six-week course I will eat her pre-planned diet (lots of red and green vegetables and fruit, loads of

protein-rich fish and chicken, not many carbs, six hours between meals), take the supplements she recommends, follow her skin care regime and do 20 minutes of simple exercises, six days a week. "It's not difficult," she tells me.

She then gives me skin-care products, all created by herself: toner, cleanser, serum, face cream and eye cream. I am to use these morning and night. She reaches up to a shelf and presents me with an astounding arrangement of pills, with names such as Rapid Healing Zinc Gluconate, Age Block and Rehydra Glow. I am to take 12 combined capsules a day.

Nirdosh made the formula for the pills herself, after 10 years of research. She tells me that the skin creams target the deeper cellular layers of skin aging that surgery cannot reverse or repair. "These treatments boost skin-cell immunity," she says. "It's an alternative to cosmetic surgery." The cream itself is described as "a superior anti-aging cream with special wrinkle-plumping collagen molecules to smooth away age lines and create youthful, firmer and radiant skin."

I tell her she sounds evangelical. "I am," she says.

The evidence is disputed, however. Marsha Gordon MD, vice chairwoman of dermatology at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, says: "The bottom line is that if these creams could accomplish the same thing as a medical procedure, they would be drugs, not cosmetics." Gordon does agree, however, that collagen is the support structure that gives our skin a firm, young appearance. When levels remain plentiful, our skin looks young and fresh. When levels decline, we lose that support and wrinkles begin to form. Some scientists believe that topically applying Nirdosh-type skin creams to the skin might help it make more collagen on its own. This would have a "filling" effect similar to the wrinkle injections.

We go to the rear of her house, where Nirdosh has a gym. She takes me through the exercises: 20 minutes every other day on upper body exercises (shoulder presses and the like), 20 minutes of lower-body movements (squats, lunges and so on). She tells me this type of repetitive exercise specifically triggers anti-aging hormones. "Too much continuous heavy exercise is too stressful for our bodies and actually makes us age. These movements will tone you up and not make you look older than you are."

She gives me a couple of final tips. I must try to sleep eight hours a night ... and I must stop showing any expression in my face. "You laugh a lot," she says, "and that's why you are getting wrinkles."

When she first started her own anti-aging plan more than a decade ago, Nirdosh sat in front of the mirror and watched how she moved her face. "All repetitive movements give you wrinkles," she says. "You have to change the way you move your face, otherwise you will age faster."

called Turning Back the Clock organized by the Royal Society, researchers talked of a future in which certain medicines will help us live longer and better. Nir Barzilai of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York said that he found he was treating patients in their 100s who were in great shape. "They're driving and painting, and they say life is beautiful. I have this bias that makes me believe we have the ability as a species to get to 100 if we prevent some of these age-related diseases." Barzilai told the conference that his "vision" was a daily pill that would stave off the effects of anti-aging, to be taken in our 40s and 50s. "To do this, aging would need to be classed as a treatable condition." He echoes Nirdosh when he says: "It needs to be classed as a disease."

But what about how we look? This, surely, is what preoccupies many women.

The search for my own "amortality" takes me to a small clinic in a town in Oxfordshire, near London. A friend has recommended it because, she says, it's renowned for doing work on women's faces that leaves them looking as if nothing has been done to them at all.

I meet Stephanie, a co-director of the clinic. She tells me that her job is to make women look as if they have just come back from a relaxing holiday. I ask her what she would recommend for me. "You're losing weight in your face," she says. She runs her finger along the lines that go down from my nose to my mouth. Then she stares at my temples. "They need filling out," she says. For under US\$720 she can get rid of the lines round my mouth with filler — a chemical injected directly into the deep lines down the side of my face. And then there's Sculptra, which is, according to the blurb Stephanie gives me, "an injectable volumizing treatment that stimulates the build-up of the body's own collagen to smooth out lines and wrinkles and restore lost facial volume to give you a fuller, younger-looking face." Sculptra would push the bill up to around US\$1,400; but, Stephanie says, if I am really going to push the boat out, we could do a bit of tear duct filling, a touch of Botox to make the area around my eyelids less saggy, and maybe some collagen for my lips ...

I go for the filler — Restylane, containing hyaluronic acid. She puts an anesthetizing cream on my face and says: "This won't hurt." It does, but within seconds it's over. I stare at my face in a mirror. My wrinkles haven't gone — but they have definitely softened. This is, I decide, a good thing.

Mayer says that "our eyes are getting so acclimated to seeing people who have fixed their teeth, dyed their hair and fixed other imperfections that we're increasingly startled by nature. As cosmetic procedures become more widespread, so nature becomes ever more surprising and unpleasant." And customers are starting younger. I know women in their 20s who have had Botox. Jean-Louis Sebagh, popularly known as the "king of Botox," and creator of a celebrated anti-aging range, claims that if a woman in her 40s comes to see him, he can keep her looking that way for the next 20 years.

But is reversing the aging process truly possible? Nirdosh says she knows it is, and says that "hormones are the magic bullet to youth." I ask her why we should even be looking for the magic bullet for youth. She appears amazed by my question. "Why on earth wouldn't we? Most of my clients are A-listers and figureheads who want to preserve their looks and remain youthful. Once they have seen the results and start to look younger and sexier, they are motivated to remain on the plan. The results of the plan are a natural needle-free face and body-lift. Also, as a real bonus, you get more confidence, and sex drive soars!"

The needle-free concept is interesting to me, the idea being that we are rejuvenated naturally from the inside rather than having something alien and unknown injected in to us.

But in reality I'm not so sure. I so wanted Nirdosh's regime to work — but ultimately I found it almost impossible to stick to. I couldn't wait six hours between meals. I craved sweet foods (when I don't usually) and my desire to snack increased 20-fold. You have to lead a very regimented, regular life in order to stick to it. My life is chaotic. I didn't have time to prepare the right types of meals. I don't have weights, so I couldn't effectively do the exercises. I tried to get eight hours' sleep a night but my children kept waking me up.

I couldn't take the right supplements at the right time.

I forgot to do all the steps of the skin-care routine. And I just kept on laughing and creating up my face.

At the end of six weeks, I feel that nothing has changed.

I am still exhausted, my sex drive hasn't gone through the roof and I look the same age as when I started. I am not thinner or leaner, my face is not plumper. I have failed.

I call Nirdosh and tell her. She sounds saddened. "Are you really finding it that hard?" she says.

And yet when I arrive at Sunday lunch with friends, absolutely everyone turns and stares.

"My God," they all say, "you look about 10 years younger."

NIRDOSH'S ANTI-AGING PLAN

1 EXERCISE

It sends signals to the brain to send anti-aging hormones surging back into the body, reform dwindling muscle tissue, strengthen collagen, and firm, tighten and lift the body.

2 DIET

Special eating methods unlock the dormant anti-aging gene we all have inside us, and specific foods are used to amplify anti-aging hormones, as well as boost cellular repair.

3 SKIN CARE

Treats the outer layer of the skin (the epidermis) to boost skin-cell immunity, healing wrinkles and age scars.

4 NUTRITION

A combination of youth pills, to tackle aging in the inner skin layer (the dermis) that surgery can't reach.

TOTAL COST: US\$2,165 for six weeks, including supplements and face creams.

SOURCE: THE GUARDIAN