

The New York Times

Do My Pores Look Big to You?



Ann Johansson for The New York Times

SUCKED AWAY Tony Silla performs pore treatment on Julie Kokesch, starting with a heat mask, left, followed by extraction, center, and a galvanic current mask, right, which he said stimulates collagen.

By [CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS](#)

Published: June 1, 2011

LATELY Justine Heilner, 37, a landscape architect in Manhattan, has been noticing dirt in more than just her gardens. When she gazes into the mirror, she also sees what looks like grime in the enlarged pores on her face that used to be unnoticeable. Alas, aging brings so many fresh thrills.

To get a poreless look, Ms. Heilner sometimes uses primer, a kind of under-makeup spackle, especially when she performs as a trapeze artist. But these days, plenty of women don't leave the house without first achieving a flawless smooth look.

“Girls on the subway have so much more makeup now, and look more *produced* than they used to,” she said, adding, “If I had HDTV, I would be more obsessed.”

Some fret about fine lines and sun spots; others are fixated on pores. High-definition television has arguably upped the ante. Consider the celebrity with glistening teeth and yogic arms, but a jarringly pock-marked nose in close-ups. Viewers think, “If *her* pores look like that, what do mine look like?” said Dr. Mary Lupo, a clinical professor of dermatology at Tulane University School of Medicine.

Like home renovators who overhaul the kitchen only to then find fault with the master bath, some dermatology patients feel that, once their wrinkles are relaxed and their brown spots treated, their pores stand out. Such is the level of worry that doctors have nicknamed the condition “porexia.”

“There’s a level of obsessiveness,” Dr. Lupo said. “Instead of looking at the global picture, they overfocus on an individual component of the picture.”

It’s not just women who are concerned about large, perpetually clogged pores. Tony Silla, an owner of the Face Place and the head aesthetician at its Los Angeles flagship, said men vent about the craterlike look of enlarged pores more now than when he got into the business 16 years ago. “They don’t want their nose to look like their grandfather’s nose,” he said.

For more than a decade, the grooming brand Anthony for Men has sold a deep-pore clay cleansing mask. At first, convincing boardroom types they needed it was “a little bit of a challenge,” said John C. Gallo, the company’s director of product education. But today men worry about looking shiny or clogged and, he said, “maintaining a normal pore size.”

Just try getting them to admit it. Brian Giambalvo, 34, a Brooklynite who works in financial services, inherited oily skin, so he said that keeping his pores clean is definitely a priority, but he wouldn’t go so far as to get treatment. “I could care less about their size,” he said. “I see men out there who have no visible pores. It works for them. But this is me.”

AH, the serenity of accepting what you cannot change (at least not radically). Pore size is mostly genetically determined and grows with age, despite the conventional wisdom that only teenagers are swiping their noses with Stridex. The more collagen lost, the looser the pores’ natural support structure becomes, making them great nets for dead skin cells. “Loosening that girdle over time” makes them look bigger, said Dr. Amy Derick, a dermatologist in Barrington, Ill.

Milena Turok, the director of aesthetic procedures at Dermatology Partners in Wellesley, Mass., said she hears regularly from people hovering around 40: "My skin sags, and my pores are large."

Even some elderly people are bothered enough by their dilated pores to take action. "It gets to the point that they are so obvious it's not attractive at all," said Dr. Marta I. Rendon, a dermatologist in Boca Raton, Fla., whose practice has two medical aestheticians booked to capacity. "A couple of elderly guys come to get facials with the girls," Dr. Rendon said.

No matter what marketers might lead the gullible to believe, pores cannot be shrunk permanently. But they can look smaller, temporarily.

Sales of face primers like Smashbox's Photo Finish Foundation Primer, products that give a smooth canvas for makeup, have almost doubled in dollar volume since 2007, said Karen Grant, vice president for beauty at the NPD Group, a market research firm. "We all have this at our disposal," Ms. Grant said, explaining the prevailing logic. "If we don't utilize it, we're slacking."

Some of the pore-paranoid turn to facials that include extraction, and exfoliation (taking off dead skin cells either chemically or physically with grains or tiny beads). Mrs. Turok recommends Dermalogica's Daily Microfoliant (her office's best seller) and SkinCeuticals' Retexturing Activator. After such maintenance, "the whole skin looks smoother," Mrs. Turok said.

Dr. Fredric Brandt, a dermatologist in Manhattan and Coral Gables, Fla., agreed. "Keeping pores cleaned out is going to make them look a lot smaller," he said. (Somewhat hyperbolically, Dr. Brandt's seven-product line for pores, which includes a blackhead extractor called a "vacuum cleaner," was renamed Pores No More in 2009.)

But like exercise, physical exfoliation even once or twice a week can seem an unpleasant task. "Most people surprisingly don't exfoliate," Mr. Silla said. "It's laziness."

Even the lazy, though, can use a cleanser with salicylic acid or glycolic acid routinely, or get a prescription for a tretinoin like Atralin or Renova, if it doesn't irritate their skin (causing redness and flakes on top of the pore problem).

Dr. Rendon's practice also has an Isolaz machine, which has a suction device and is cleared by the Food and Drug Administration to treat mild to moderate acne. It has been a hit among her female patients in their 30s and 40s who like its deep pore cleaning. "It sucks all the debris and sebaceous material out of the pore, then

shines a light that shrinks the sebaceous gland," said Dr. Rendon, who is a clinical associate professor of dermatology at the University of Miami School of Medicine. (She charges \$200 to \$300 per Isolaz treatment.)

Dr. Rendon added that there is another reason to fear sun damage: "It leads to bigger-looking pores," she said. She recommends daily, year-round use of a sunscreen. If the damage is already done, treatments that aim to stimulate collagen — for instance, intense pulsed light (IPL) and certain lasers or peels — can improve the appearance of pores for 4 to 12 months at most, Dr. Lupo said.

But "it will require constant maintenance," she warned. Alas: "We have no permanent solution to make pores appear smaller."