

Health

SKIN DEEP

Removing the Web of Spider Veins

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EVEN on a good day, modeling swimsuits for [O, The Oprah Magazine](#), Nazanin Homa, 30, hoped the spray-tan nozzles would be on full blast. For years, Ms. Homa, a French-Iranian beauty, has fretted about how best to conceal nearly a dozen prominent spider veins on the back and sides of her legs.



Associated Press

"It's ironic that someone always being looked at under a loupe would have this problem," Ms. Homa said.

She attributes the map of purple-bluish squiggles on her legs to [genetics](#) — her mother and sisters have them — and her modeling career, which involves prolonged periods of time on her feet, often in high heels.

Last spring she had the latest spider vein treatment, laser-assisted sclerotherapy, at the Vein Treatment Center in Manhattan (at \$500 for about a half-dozen 30-minute sessions). "For the first time since I was a teen I could bare my legs in a short skirt without feeling self-conscious," she said.

Spider veins occur mostly on the legs and face. Experts say 75 percent of the population will be affected by the condition, which is also known as [telangiectasia](#). They affect men and women, usually starting in their 40s and 50s. Genetics, sun damage, age and stress are believed to be contributing factors, as are [smoking](#), alcohol, [obesity](#) and other underlying conditions, such as [rosacea](#). For women, [estrogen](#) surges during [pregnancy](#) and hormonal changes brought on by [birth control](#) pills can also play a role.

Spider veins are formed when superficial veins near the skin's surface leak tiny amounts of blood. "The blood branches out into the tissue and forms little points and patterns of discoloration," said Dr. Luis Navarro, a phlebologist (vein specialist) and the medical director of the Vein Treatment Center in Manhattan, who treated Ms. Homa. "Through treatment we can blanch out these blood vessels that will then fade away and eventually be reabsorbed into the body naturally."

Although usually not considered a serious medical condition (unlike [varicose veins](#), in which blood is trapped due to valve problems in the veins, often leading to intense discomfort and occasionally rupture), experts say that spider veins may indicate other underlying venous issues, including a sluggish circulatory system.

The condition is common enough to have spawned a global market of creams, serums and concealers that is projected to increase 18 percent this year, according to Taya Tomasello, an analyst at the Mintel International Group, a market research firm. Many of the products are based on the claim that they contain vitamin K, an antihemorrhagic vitamin said to promote blood clotting and therefore reduce the blood seepage and ultimately the appearance of spider veins.

But generally these products do not meet with approval from physicians.

"No studies have been done that have proved their efficacy, or at least not that I know of," said Dr. Michael Traub, a naturopathic physician in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii. "You can't just put something on the surface of the skin and expect a spider vein to go away," Dr. Traub said.

Some topicals, such as Auriderm Clearing Gel, contain a form of vitamin K called vitamin K oxide. "[Vitamin K](#) oxide helps rebuild vascular walls and repair damage surrounding them, reducing the appearance of spider veins," said Elliott Milstein, president of Biopelle, the Michigan-based company that distributes the product. He added that Auriderm is often used as an adjunctive therapy "prior to sclerotherapy to reduce spider veins, or after laser treatment to clean up what the laser may have missed."

For some, a \$50 cream may seem preferable to spending hundreds of dollars for sclerotherapy or laser treatments.

Sclerotherapy involves injecting each spider vein with a solution that irritates the vein's lining and causes its walls to collapse. Until the 1940s, the chemical compounds used in these injections — such as iron and mercury solutions — had dubious side effects. But, now, sclerotherapy is performed with saline-based compounds and even more recently, a foam that prevents leakage to surrounding areas of the tissue.

"The gold standard of spider vein treatment is sclerotherapy," said Dr. Brian Zelickson, associate professor of dermatology at the [University of Minnesota](#) and founder of Zel Skin and Laser Specialists, a skin-care center in Edina, Minn., near Minneapolis. "The needles can be guided by [ultrasound](#)," he said.

And the solution used in the injections, or sclerosant, can be customized to the color, depth and thickness of a particular patient's spider veins.

"Laser is a good option for the needle-phobic or on veins too small to inject," Dr. Zelickson said.

Laser-assisted sclerotherapy implements the two treatments in tandem, with the laser beam pointed at each injection site along each vein to speed healing.

"In general, we're noticing a rise in the number of people opting for spider vein treatment," Dr. Zelickson said. He attributes the increase to better technology and an aging population of appearance-conscious baby boomers.

"What usually happens is someone comes in for endovenous treatments for larger veins and a lot of times they'll say, 'While you're at it, take a look at these smaller veins and let me know if you can do anything about them,'" Dr. Zelickson said.

The answer is usually "yes."

In fact, laser treatment for spider veins on the legs jumped to 133,192 procedures in 2008 from 85,907 in 2000, according to the [American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery](#). And that's just counting what the society's membership performed.

Although both sclerotherapy and laser treatments are commonly performed to eradicate spider veins, there is some pain and up to eight weeks of healing time. Both treatments usually involve repeated visits. And there are no guarantees — spider veins may return to a treated area and there is no way to prevent new ones from forming. Since spider vein treatments are considered cosmetic, they are rarely covered by insurance.

Experts in the industry say in addition to a rise in the number of spider vein procedures performed, they have also noticed a rise in the number of places performing the procedures.

"It used to be this kind of thing was performed in a hospital or possibly a special clinic attached to a surgeon or hospital," said Dr. Cynthia Shortell, chief of vascular surgery at Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina. "Now, anyone who owns a laser can do it, and there are so many new centers and clinics popping up. I'll be driving my kids to soccer games through the countryside and suddenly see a billboard in the middle of nowhere for a vein specialist."

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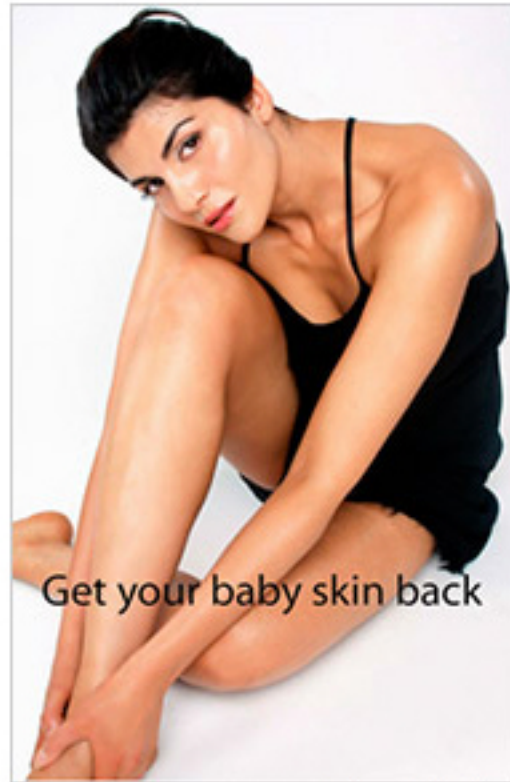
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CLOSE-UP The model Nazanin Homa had laser-assisted sclerotherapy for spider veins in her legs.

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