Botox to the rescue

Yes, the drug smooths wrinkles, but it also treats several medical conditions

Kimberly Hayes Taylor / The Detroit News

For years, Margaret Fassio's head shook so badly, it appeared she was constantly saying, "No."

Doctors believed the Warren woman had a nerve problem and gave her muscle relaxers, but Fassio's body remained tilted to the right. The excruciatingly painful muscle condition had her body so contorted her head was nearly lying on her shoulder.

"It was horrible," she says. "The only way I can describe it is a stiff neck, only 10 times worse. People would stare at me and say, 'Oh, my God.' Women in stores with babies would run away from me, like I had some kind of dreaded disease."

Relief arrived when her doctor diagnosed the disorder as spasmodic torticollis, a form of dystonia, and prescribed Botox injections.

"It's my wonder drug," she says of Botox. "My life-saver."

Botox, commonly used for relaxing fine facial lines and wrinkles, is becoming a popular treatment for conditions ranging from migraine headaches, bladder control and excessive sweating to multiple sclerosis and even cerebral palsy in children.

"We should be every excited," says Dr. Paul Cullis, chief of neurology at St. John Hospital and Medical Center in Detroit. "It treats diseases that nothing else will treat."

Botox therapy initially was approved by the Federal Drug Administration in 1989 for treatment of crossed eyes and uncontrollable eye blinking associated with dystonia for patients age 12 and older. It was used for cosmetic purposes when patients with spastic eye disorder discovered the wrinkles near their eyes disappeared. By 2000, Botox was approved to treat cervical dystonia in adults to decrease the severity of abnormal head positions and neck pain. And in 2004, the drug received approval for hyperhidrosis, excessive underarm and palm sweating.

Since then, studies also indicate Botox successfully treats depression, bladder control problems, enlarged prostate and headaches.

To administer the drug, doctors inject patients in the affected area of the body. Typically, improvement can be seen in about five days, with results lasting from three to nine months, depending on the individual and the condition. Costs range from $500 to $2,000; insurance companies pay for some therapeutic treatment.

Dr. John Trimble, a Southfield-based thoracic surgeon who specializes in sweating diseases, says he uses Botox to treat hyperhidrosis. He has patients who perspire so severely they change clothes several times daily, and avoid shaking hands and touching in relationships.

"It's very effective," he says. "After treatment, patients don't call us back for seven months."

Dr. Cheryl Perlis, a nationally-recognized women's health and aesthetic specialist in Chicago, says she discovered that Botox even works for people who have "hypergums," gums that extend below the lip line when smiling. She injects the drug near the nose to drop the lip. She uses the drug for her own issue with teeth grinding.

Perlis says she believes the drug is becoming popular for therapeutic uses because people are aware of it.

"Patients ask for it," she says. "Maybe the fear factor is gone."

Cullis of St. John Hospital says these therapeutic uses aren't new, but the public wouldn't accept it as a treatment.

"We tried to get people interested in this in the early 1990s, but most people really weren't that interested because these were fairly rare diseases," Cullis says. "Then people found out that stars in Hollywood were using it for their wrinkles. Now, they know their favorite movie actresses are using it and millions of Americans are getting cosmetic Botox. They are interested because they know what it is now."

You can reach Kimberly Hayes Taylor at (313) 222-2058 or ktaylor@detnews.com.

What is Botox?

Botox, produced by Irvine, Calif.-based Allergan, is a purified protein that temporarily reduces the activity of muscles.