

EXTREME BEAUTY: EYEBROW TRANSPLANT

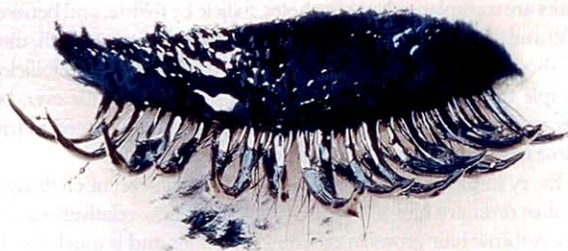
The eyebrow transplant is the latest cosmetic treatment set to hit the UK. It's a painful five-hour procedure that has never before been tested by a British journalist. Until now. Editor's warning: this may make you wince

words by AVRIL MAIR

I'm lying face down on a bed in a very clean white room. I'm wearing a crisp blue gown; a proper hospital one that ties behind the neck. I've been lying here for an hour and, although I don't know it yet, I'll be lying here for four more, this time on my back, muscles tightening in protest, body growing increasingly clammy. I'm digging my nails into the palms of my hands, trying to give myself a new focus, welcoming the distraction of discomfort. I'm conscious that my heart is racing, my breathing shallow and ragged. I'm nervous. And so I should be – I'm going through one of the most dramatic and groundbreaking beauty treatments possible. I'm having an eyebrow transplant.

I'm lying here because of my own stupidity. I couldn't leave my eyebrows alone. I trimmed, I teased and tortured my brows for years. And, in return, they stopped growing. The hair I plucked out simply refused to come back. And so I drew them in with pencil. On a trip to Tokyo I bought plastic stencils in a crazy beauty emporium. I experimented with powder; I considered tattoos, then reconsidered. I tried everything. Nothing worked. No matter how many hours I spent obsessing – and how I obsessed! – nothing looked natural. I couldn't get my eyebrows back. I grew a fringe instead.

'Plucking and waxing eventually damage hair follicles,' explains Dr Ken Washenik, medical director of Bosley, the American hair replacement company that developed eyebrow transplants. 'This means that the hair has been lost for ever.' Oh, if only somebody had told me this earlier. But I had a mother who never wore ➤



make-up. I had no sisters or cousins. I didn't read teen mags. I didn't know any better. And so I overplucked my brows and am now lying face down on a bed while someone prepares me for surgery. Stupid doesn't even begin to cover it.

The first proper eyebrow transplant was carried out in the US in the early 1990s. The procedure now accounts for just three per cent of all hair transplants, but numbers increased by 35 per cent last year and it's rapidly gaining in popularity. It's now the hottest beauty treatment over there, but here it's still relatively unknown. Around 100 were carried out in the UK in 2007. Beauty editors haven't tested it – I'm the first journalist to go through the procedure, but I certainly won't be the last. Dr Greg Williams from the British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons agrees. 'The UK is about 10 years behind the US in terms of cosmetic surgery,' he says. 'The eyebrow transplant wave is yet to hit here. But it will.'

It's a painstaking procedure. The surgeon shaves a strip at the back of the head known as the 'donor area'. Hair taken from it will behave as though it's still growing there, no matter where else in the body it's placed. Hair follicles are extracted from this shaved area, one at a time, and cleaned under a microscope. The doctor then creates incisions where the new eyebrows will be, leaving tiny holes angled in the direction each hair needs to grow. The individual hairs are transplanted into the holes, follicle by follicle, and between 250 and 350 are needed for each brow. Over the next month, most of this hair falls out, then regrows from the newly placed follicle a couple of months later. This hair will stay in place for ever, but because it's head hair it will continue to grow. You'll need to trim those new eyebrows with nail scissors once a week.

Every surgical procedure has its own particular set of challenges. Unlike ordinary hair transplants, which are now relatively easy to do, eyebrow hair grows in different directions and is much harder to replicate. It's possible to create a whole new eyebrow or just fill out sparse brows, but as the transplanted head hair is much coarser than eyebrow hair, it can be difficult to get it to 'match'. There are also risks of scarring and numbness afterwards. Add to that a price tag of around £2,000 and it's not a quick fix for those who fancy this season's fuller brow. But it was the only option for me.

'So whose eyebrows do you want?' I'm staring a little too closely at the head of Nadeem Uddin Khan, director of the Harley Street Hair Clinic, which is pioneering eyebrow transplants – or, as he prefers to call it, 'eyebrow reconstruction' – in the UK. Nadeem has had a hair transplant. So have numerous premier league footballers and pop stars, though he's annoyingly discreet about which ones. Certainly nobody would guess that he'd had one, even this close up – transplantation techniques have moved on since the procedure first gained popularity during the 1980s. 'In the UK there is a lack of knowledge about female hair loss, especially in the eyebrow area,' he says, 'but it's relatively common in women. There hasn't been a convincing solution until now.'

My eyebrows are thin and taper to an abrupt end. I don't look at pictures of Natalia Vodianova and think I could have those thick, swooping brows, which act like an exclamation point above her exquisite, cat-like face. I'm not unrealistic, I'd settle for the commonplace. I'd like to leave the house without having to wear

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make-up or cake on mascara because my painted brows look odd and heavy on a naked face. I'd like to pull my hair back in a ponytail and stop hiding behind a fringe. I'd like to give my eyebrows no thought at all. For once, I'd be delighted to just be ordinary.

And so I find myself lying face down on a bed in a clean white room while Dr Andrea Tchakalov begins her surgery. The shape of my new eyebrows has been outlined with purple felt-tip pen. I've taken antibiotics, painkillers and pills to stop swelling, and a sedative. An inch-wide strip has been shaved from the back of my head, from ear to ear – I'm assured no one will be able to see this bald patch, as it'll be hidden by my long layers. Worst of all, I've had local anaesthetic injected across the shaved area in a handful of tiny, excruciating pinpricks, so that 750 hair follicles can be extracted, one at a time. After the hair for transplant is removed, the real work begins. I turn over and have more local anaesthetic injected, this time across my brows. And it hurts even more. Dr Andrea slowly and precisely makes 350 angled incisions on each brow, where the new hair will go. The extracted follicles are then put into each of the 700 holes, one at a time. I start counting, then give up. Time passes slowly but I'm not willing it to be over, not at all. These few hours are going to change the way I look for ever.

All I feel immediately afterwards is shock. I put on my biggest Bottega Veneta sunglasses and hurry home, clutching antibiotics and a spray of saline solution. I have to use this on my brows every 30 minutes for several days. I have strict instructions not to touch the area, sleep on my front or scratch. I can't expose my face to the sun or rain for a fortnight. I can't do anything, in short, which might kill off those precious little hairs.

I look terrible. My brows are bright red and spotted with blood, while huge bruises are beginning to darken my swollen eyes. I can't bear to look in the mirror. My boyfriend can't bear to look at me. The next few days are a nightmare. I don't leave the house without sunglasses and a hat. I don't leave the house much at all. I ache all over. The hours of lying prone and tense have done that. My brows are fading to pink but my eyes are now purple.

Then – finally! – I can wash my face again and rinse off the crusty blood, scabbed skin and stray hairs. For the next two months I will use baby shampoo on my eyebrows, morning and night. It itches. It will be four weeks before the bruises fade away. But I'm starting to look normal. Although I don't really look normal – I look like someone different. I can look in the mirror again but I don't recognise myself any more. I look like someone with perfect eyebrows. ■

Harley Street Hair Clinic, London W1. Enq (020) 7177 2345; www.hshairclinic.co.uk. Eyebrow reconstruction from £2,000 to £3,000