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Why a dermatologist says peptide injections carry serious risk

If a wellness influencer suggests you inject anything bought online to look younger, walk away.

By RITU GUPTA

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Peptides promise to reverse the clock on ageing skin, but it's important to know where the line between legitimate skincare and genuine danger lies. Picture: iStock

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There is a quiet but accelerating craze sweeping wellness culture and as a dermatologist I feel compelled to separate the signal from the noise before someone gets seriously hurt.

[Peptides are having a moment](#). Walk into any pharmacy or scroll through Instagram and you'll find serums, supplements and, increasingly, injectable vials – all promising to reverse the clock on ageing skin. Patients are asking me about them weekly. So let me be clear about what the science actually says, and where the line between legitimate skincare and genuine danger lies.

[Peptides are short-chain amino acids derived from proteins](#). There are several types – signal peptides, enzyme-inhibiting peptides, neurotransmitter peptides and carrier peptides – and they perform different functions depending on how and where they're applied.

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In their topical form, as ingredients in a cream or serum, the evidence is broadly reassuring. A recent review of 19 reasonably well-designed randomised controlled trials found measurable benefits: improved hydration, reduced wrinkles, smoother skin texture and better brightness. Effects on skin elasticity and thickness were less consistent but, overall, topical peptides appear to be low-risk, non-invasive agents with genuine anti-ageing potential.

I have no quarrel with a well-formulated peptide moisturiser. Used as directed, applied to the surface of the skin, these products sit within a reasonable risk profile. Larger trials are still needed to nail down the full picture – and we need better studies comparing oral and topical formulations – but the foundation of safety is there.

What concerns me deeply is everything happening beyond the pharmacy shelf.

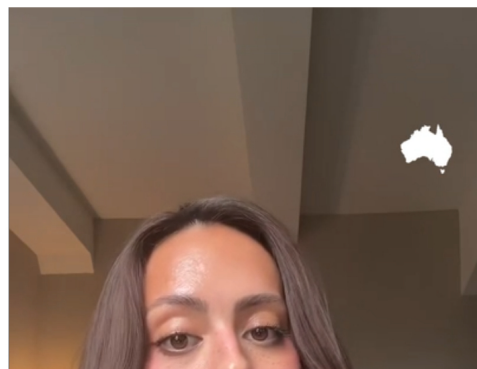


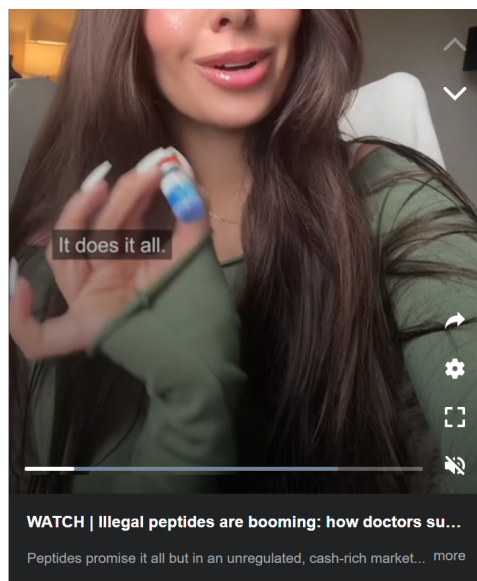
- Topical peptide skincare products have reasonable evidence behind them and carry a low risk profile, with studies showing improvements in hydration, wrinkle reduction and skin texture.
- Injectable peptides sold online are an entirely different matter – unstudied in humans, unregulated, and capable of triggering serious immune reactions, hormonal disruption, and potentially cancer.
- Wellness influencers are not medical practitioners, and no online purchase justifies injecting an untested substance without clinical oversight.

There is [a growing, largely unregulated grey market for injectable peptides](#), and it is being driven not by clinicians but by wellness influencers. Names such as BPC-157 and GHK copper peptides are circulating online, marketed to young people as transformative biohacks. These substances have not been studied in humans. The available data comes from a handful of rat studies. We simply do not know what injecting them into a human body does.

Let me spell out what that uncertainty means in practice.

Every injection carries risk – infection, scarring, irritation, damage to underlying muscle and tissue. That risk multiplies dramatically when the person holding the needle has no clinical training. But the deeper concern goes beyond technique. These peptides are foreign substances. They can trigger immune reactions ranging from localised inflammation to anaphylaxis – a life-threatening emergency that can kill.





More troubling still: some of these peptides work by stimulating growth factors. When applied to the surface of the skin in a cream, that stimulation is localised and modest. When injected directly, we lose that containment. Uncontrolled stimulation of growth factors is not rejuvenation – it is, at its most dangerous, a potential trigger for cancer. A cancer cell is, by definition, one that has escaped the body's normal regulatory mechanisms. We should not be casually experimenting with pathways that could drive exactly that process.

Some peptides also interfere with hormone production, disrupting normal hormonal balance. Others that overstimulate growth hormones can cause excessive growth – of organs, of bone. These are not hypothetical risks dreamed up to dampen enthusiasm. They are predictable biological consequences of interfering with complex systems we do not yet fully understand in this context.

Yet [these products can be imported freely, purchased online and injected](#) in uncontrolled settings with no medical oversight whatsoever.

The contrast could not be more stark. Topical peptide skincare, used as intended, carries low risk and has reasonable evidence behind it. Injectable peptides sourced from the internet, administered by non-clinicians based on influencer advice, carry the potential for serious permanent harm.



Topical peptide skincare carries low risk, in stark contrast to injectable peptides sourced from the internet. Picture: iStock

Australia urgently needs better regulatory frameworks around the importation and promotion of injectable peptides. Wellness influencers are not medical practitioners. An enthusiastic Instagram post is not a clinical trial.

If you're considering peptides as part of your skincare routine, a quality serum is a reasonable choice. If someone is suggesting you inject anything bought online to look younger, walk away – and perhaps suggest they speak to a doctor first.

[Dr Ritu Gupta](#), MBBS (Hons), PhD, FACD, is a medical and cosmetic dermatologist. Visit her [website](#) for more information. Instagram: [@dr_ritu_dermatologist](#)

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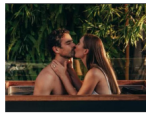
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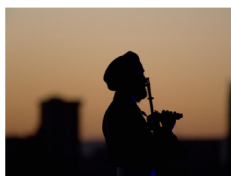
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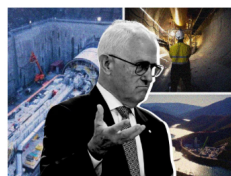
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We peeked from under the table. Some took bottles of booze

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