

The Panic Over ‘Tech Neck’—and Race for a Cure

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March 27, 2026

The beauty industry is seizing on anxiety about the wrinkles from excessive scrolling; ‘I am too young for this.’



Molly J. Curley recently discovered wrinkles she diagnosed as ‘tech neck.’ Molly J. Curley

Behold “tech neck,” a name for those horizontal lines that develop across your neck with age and apparently worsen with incessant smartphone use. Anxiety about the affliction is spreading, and the race for a cure is on. The beauty industry is offering up a bevy of solutions, including creams and massage rollers, lubricated silicon masks and futuristic-looking LED red-light collars.

Kelley Liu learned she had it when her 55-year-old mother delivered the ultimate insult: “You have more wrinkles on your neck than I do.” The 24-year-old beauty influencer was stunned.

“Is it because I’m short?” Liu speculated. “Maybe my neck is shorter than others, or maybe it’s because I had an iPhone since I was 8 years old.”

Rather than try one of the many remedies being promoted online, she slathered her neck with a retinol face cream and wrapped it in plastic wrap from her kitchen.

She said her lines aren't gone but that it's "significantly better."

The neck has long been a "dead giveaway" of one's age, Nora Ephron wrote in her collection of essays, "I Feel Bad About My Neck and Other Thoughts on Being a Woman." While genetics and aging play a role, medical professionals say constant phone use can exacerbate the issue.

"Some of those fixed dramatic horizontal lines do become worse because people are literally spending hours on their phone and looking down," said Dr. Melanie Palm, a cosmetic dermatologist in Solana Beach, Calif.

Americans spend an average of 5 hours and 16 minutes on their phones daily, with Gen Z logging 6 hours and 27 minutes of daily screen time, according to a survey from data management firm Harmony Healthcare IT.

"The neck ages in dog years all by itself but tech neck is rapidly increasing our dog years," Kelly Ripa warned viewers late last year.

This aesthetic tech neck isn't to be confused with the orthopedic condition, in which hours of looking down leave people with joint pain in the cervical spine. It joins a family of facial afflictions that also includes "necklace lines," "Crows' feet" and "elevens"—the wrinkles between the eyebrows. For the beauty industry, the diagnosis arrived at the perfect time. Finding another body part to obsess about is key as consumers otherwise cut back on multistep skincare routines—a trend dubbed "skinimalism."

Olay launched a face-and-neck-lifting treatment this year and is marketing the product partly as a solution to the affliction. One ad for the Procter & Gamble brand shows a woman applying the product to her neck with the text, "Tech Neck Got You Down? Give it a Lift."

Solawave made tech neck a pillar of its latest social-media campaign when it released a new version of its red-light therapy masks.

An article on "How to Fix Tech Neck Wrinkles" is now part of a Grooming Manual put out by Brickell, which has a new skin-tightening neck cream.

Brickell says holding your head at a 45-degree downward angle while scrolling is like supporting a 49-pound weight with your neck.

RoC recognized the phenomenon in focus groups three years ago. The skincare brand's R&D team developed a moisturizing stick designed specifically for the neck.

RoC initially targeted its typical customer base, women between 40 and 65. In January, it launched a social-media ad campaign aimed at younger women, featuring dermatology influencer Derguru, and says sales of the serum are up 17% for the first quarter.

Molly J. Curley, a 31-year-old from Boston, was recently scrolling through her social-media feeds and saw people talking about tech neck. Given that her job as an influencer calls for hours of phone time, Curley decided to inspect her neck. “I looked in the mirror and I was like ‘Oh gosh, I have tech neck,’” she said. “I am too young for this.”

She bought an Eight Saints neck cream and decided to turn her problem into a revenue opportunity. She ran a paid Facebook ad in February featuring herself applying the cream. The post directed viewers to her Amazon storefront to buy the product, earning her an 8% commission on every sale. She sold \$500,000 worth of beauty products, including the Eight Saints cream, on Amazon this month.

For some consumers, creams and serums aren’t enough. New York plastic surgeon Dr. Sam Rizk said his practice has seen a 25% increase over the past two years of patients in their mid-30s seeking neck lifts, partly driven by the buzz surrounding tech neck.

In some cases, Rizk said he has recommended a less painful, low-tech fix: cellphone holders, metal contraptions that have a flexible gooseneck that holds the mobile device up to eye level.

You can find some of his suggestions by looking at your phone—he posts regularly on Instagram.