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Ray of Light

Brown spots? *Bzzzz*. Unwanted hair? *Zap*. Lasers are more effective than ever—for nearly every skin issue under the sun. **By Joan Kron**

In the beauty world, only one person provokes a bigger fight-or-flight reaction than Johnny Scissorhappy, the hairstylist who strongly suggests cutting ten inches off your shoulder-length hair—and that person is Elena Zapitoff, the spa aesthetician who insists you would look a whole lot better after a series of laser treatments on your face. Thirty years ago, when resurfacing lasers first entered the realm of dermatology with all the promise of a science-fiction breakthrough, high expectations led to mild disappointment. Doctors had figured out how to direct a beam of intense light at the skin to burn off the top layer, allowing new skin to grow in its place. But the first devices could literally be a pain for patients, who might end up with beautiful results but only after what looked like a months-long sunburn. For those with dark skin, lasers were risky at best.

But since then, the technology—and the results—have improved tremendously, making lasers one of dermatology's most valued tools. "Lasers have revolutionized what we can do for the aging face," says Jeffrey Dover, an associate clinical professor of dermatology at Yale School of Medicine. Dover himself has dozens of the devices in his office for erasing brown spots, fading lines and wrinkles, smoothing rough skin, removing unwanted hair, and deleting that "Mon Amour" tattoo on a patient's wrist long after her love affair has died. The field of laser medicine is more complicated than ever, and so are the concerns of patients about which device is right for them, the cost of a laser treatment, and how much it is likely to hurt. We've rounded up the experts to answer all of these questions and more.



Some lasers leave you red for a few hours; others, for a few weeks.

NICOLAS MOORE

How does a laser work? Unlike the white light from a bulb that is a blend of all the colors of the rainbow, a laser is a focused beam of light that has just one color. When its intense rays target a problem area on the skin (a brown spot, a scar, an unwanted hair follicle), the laser's light can destroy that pigment or tissue while sparing the skin around it.

Will doctors or spas suggest a particular laser just because they happen to have it? Sadly, yes. "If all they have is one device, that's what they will offer," says Dover, who practices in Boston. "This is why you want to go to people with multiple devices," advises Jason N. Pozner, a plastic surgeon in Boca Raton, Florida, who has a large laser practice.

So how do I know if a doctor is using the right laser for me? Ask a lot of

Why are there so many different lasers? Just as a cook has many utensils, doctors have different lasers for different skin problems. "A good laser physician should have three or four to treat a broad range of problems," says Dieter Manstein, an instructor in dermatology at Harvard Medical School and coinventor of the fractional laser. There are lasers with different wavelengths, pulse duration, and energy for hair removal, skin resurfacing, blood-vessel treatments, brown spots, redness, and tattoos (see "Type Casting," page 154).

questions: What is your training? How many patients have you treated with my particular problem? What are the risks and complications? Can I see pictures—and are these yours, or are they from the laser manufacturer? "If you have broken blood vessels, you want a doctor who has done scores of those procedures," says Dover. It's not just a matter of how

many lasers you own, he says—it's a question of experience and skill with those lasers. "It boils down to trust."

Do I need to ask for the laser I need by name? No, you don't—and don't consider it. You may be tempted to ask for the same treatment your friend had, and your doctor may give it to you rather than risk you walking out the door. But leave that decision

Recovery and Results

What the healing process really looks like.

Reducing Redness

In a single treatment, dermatologist Robert Anolik used a Gemini laser to fade discoloration caused by broken capillaries and a Vbeam laser for ruddiness. "It didn't sting, except a little around my nose," says the patient.



Whole-Face Resurfacing

With topical anesthetic, dermatologist Diane Berson resurfaced the patient's face with a fractional laser. "It felt like a bad windburn," she says. After a week, "I looked younger, my pores were smaller, and makeup went on more uniformly."



Brown Spots

"Between sun damage and pregnancy, my freckles had darkened, especially one on my right cheek," says the patient. Dermatologist Brian Biesman treated her with a Q-switched alexandrite laser. By day 9, the darkest spots had sloughed off.



JODI RICHFIELD (BROWN SPOTS). FOR ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHERS' CREDITS, SEE CREDITS PAGE.

to a professional. "You need a doctor who understands what she is looking at, who prescribes the best treatment, and who knows how to administer that treatment," says Brian Biesman, a clinical assistant professor in ophthalmology, otolaryngology, and dermatology at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville.

Can you be too young for lasers?

Or too old? It's a matter of the problem you want to fix, not your age, says Tina Alster, a clinical professor of dermatology at Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, D.C. "Lots of young people have rosacea, acne, sun spots, and sun damage, and these conditions are all treatable. We treat infants with birthmarks who are only days old," she says. Still, less-intensive therapies, such as chemical peels or facials, may be enough to repair young, relatively healthy skin.

What's a Fraxel? Fraxel is a brand name and common shorthand for a whole class of lasers used for skin resurfacing, which is another word for smoothing rough patches, flattening wrinkles, and removing pigments and scar tissue. The name comes from the word "fractional," which refers

How should I prepare for a laser session?

"If you're having medium or deep skin resurfacing with a fractional laser, you should stop using glycolic and salicylic acid creams, retinoids, and hydroquinone a week before treatment," says Diane Berson, an associate clinical professor of dermatology at Weill Medical College of Cornell University. They can irritate the skin. "But don't stop sun protection." If you take aspirin (which can worsen bleeding) or other medications, make sure your doctor knows in advance.

to the way the devices deliver light. Instead of a solid beam, they bombard the target area with a polka-dot pattern that damages less tissue and speeds recovery. There are different fractional lasers for a range of different problems, from heavy-duty sun damage to stretch marks.

How about Thermage and Ulthera—are they lasers, too? Lots of devices

are mistakenly referred to as lasers even though they technically aren't. Thermage uses radio-frequency waves to generate heat that stimulates new collagen and tightens the skin. Ulthera uses another form of energy, ultrasound, for somewhat similar results. It's FDA-approved to lift sagging skin on the neck and brow and under the chin. Cold temperatures are also used cosmetically, in CoolSculpting (a.k.a. Zeltiq), a device that clamps onto the skin, shrinking the fat layers underneath. And Intense Pulsed Light, or IPL, is polychromatic light, meaning each beam contains a rainbow of colors that doctors use to zap red and brown spots and even out skin tone. Microwaves are the latest entry into the category, says Robert Anolik, a clinical assistant professor of dermatology at Weill Cornell Medical Center and New York University School of Medicine. A new device called MiraDry uses this form of energy to destroy sweat glands in armpits.

How much do laser treatments cost? That's like asking, "How much is a cashmere sweater?" You can find one at Uniqlo for \$49 and at Chanel for \$1,000. Prices vary widely.

Type Casting

The laser breakdown:

Fractional lasers

Treat: Large pores, wrinkles, blotchiness, melasma, acne scars, sagging skin
Results: Smoother skin, brighter skin tone, and smaller pores and wrinkles. Substantial improvement of most problems is seen after three or four treatments.

Recovery: From four hours of pinkness after light treatments to weeks of swelling, scabs, and peeling skin after heavy treatments

Price: \$300 to \$5,000 per treatment

Avoid: If you have severe eczema, a skin infection in the area, or a deep tan

Feels like: Warm prickles if the laser is mild. Numbing cream and painkiller

injections are given for the more powerful lasers.

Lasers for brown spots

Treat: Brown sun damage

Results: Some spots disappear entirely after one to three treatments.

Recovery: Spots turn darker brown for about a week, then fade or disappear.

Price: \$400 to \$900 per treatment per area (face, hands, arms, legs)

Avoid: If you have dark skin or a tan (even a spray tan)

Feels like: A hot pinprick

Lasers for red veins and red spots

Treat: Facial redness and red blood vessels, including minor veins on legs

Results: Up to 90 percent of redness can fade after three treatments, with less fading for leg veins.

Recovery: Redness and swelling can last several hours or days, with occasional bruising.

Price: \$400 to \$1,000

Avoid: If you have dark skin or a tan (even a spray tan)

Feels like: A pinprick with slight burning

Lasers for hair removal

Treat: Unwanted hair on the face and body

Results: Good to excellent after six treatments for face, legs, or arms and three to six for underarms and bikini area. (Each session reduces hair regrowth by about 20 percent.)

Recovery: Redness for a few hours to a few days and occasional red bumps

Price: \$75 (upper lip) and \$600 to \$1,200 (legs)

Avoid: If you have blonde or white hair. Patients with dark skin can be treated

with the long-pulsed Nd:YAG laser.

Feels like: A pinprick, except on sensitive areas such as above the lips and on the chin, underarms, and bikini area, which may require a numbing cream

Intense Pulsed Light (IPL) devices

Treat: Freckles, sun spots, and rosacea on the face, neck, and chest. Not effective for melasma.

Results: Subtle, gradual fading of discoloration and brighter skin tone after three to five treatments

Recovery: Redness on the day of treatment. Brown spots will darken before fading within a week.

Price: \$400 to \$900; may be discounted as a series

Avoid: If you have dark skin or a tan

Feels like: A rubber-band snap

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Skin

Do lasers hurt? They certainly can. Many laser treatments don't require numbing beforehand, but for deep resurfacing, "we can use a topical anesthetic or a combination of topical and pain injections plus anxiety drugs such as Ativan or Valium," says Biesman. The only time he recommends monitored sedation—a short-acting IV anesthetic that puts a patient to sleep—is for some forms of ablative resurfacing, in which the laser removes skin and can cause bleeding. **My doctor has suggested more than one laser for different problems. Can I have them all at once?**

Certain laser treatments are fine to tackle in one appointment, but many need a return visit. Skin tightening and treatment for rosacea, each of which requires a different laser, can be done one right after the other. But hair and tattoo removal from the same area can lead to scars, says Biesman.

Should I have moles removed with a laser? No. Since any mole has the potential to become malignant, each one should be examined by a doctor, who may remove it with a scalpel and send it to a pathologist to rule out cancer, according to Biesman.

Do I need to stay out of the sun if I'm getting a laser? It's not a good idea to be treated if you're tan, even if it's a spray tan, says Eric Bernstein, a clinical professor of dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania. "The laser's function is to destroy targets like freckles and brown spots, blood vessels, and tattoo pigment. But if the whole body is tan or dark, the laser mistakes it for the enemy—one big brown spot." If used improperly, the treatment can cause irritation, blisters, and discoloration. Still, certain lasers can be adjusted for patients with dark skin.

After treatment, how many days before I can leave the house? You'll have to be the judge of that. Some devices, such as IPL and the lightest fractional laser, can result in only a few hours of redness. But full-face resurfacing with a Fraxel Re:Pair can cause two to eight weeks of redness, plus weeks of pinkness (which you can cover with makeup).

Do I need a dermatologist or can any type of doctor do this effectively?

There's no such thing as a board-certified laser operator, and legal requirements vary drastically from state to state. In some, only a doctor can fire a laser, while in others, nurses and technicians can operate them. To make things more complicated, any doctor can legally wield a laser, even with no specific training. "I am allowed to deliver babies, but I don't do that," says Dover. "Yet an ob-gyn can treat you with a laser. Is that really someone you want to see?" The onus is on you to find a doctor with extensive laser experience.

How do I know that I really need a laser instead of a chemical peel or microdermabrasion? For pigment problems, don't rush to lasers until you try less aggressive treatments. "A chemical peel can get good results, similar to a laser," says Pozner. He starts his patients on a skin-care regimen, then a light chemical peel, and then, for those with extensive sun damage—or a big event in a few months—a laser. "We look at skin color and the patient's ability to take time off. If you can't spare the time, we do a lighter laser peel. But if you're in your 50s, we do something more aggressive, well in advance of a major social engagement."

How long do the results last? "Nothing lasts forever," says Berson. After a few fractional resurfacing treatments, you may want a maintenance session once a year or every few years. "It depends on how much sun damage you have." Sticking to a skin-care regimen, including sun protection and a retinoid, will reduce the damage and may eliminate the need for future laser treatments, she says. ♦