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# Beauty In A Flash

Susan Yara, 07.13.06, 12:30 AM ET

A woman never reveals her age. Unless, of course, she doesn't look it. Then, she shares her years and the name of her doctor.

These days, the worry is no longer whether we can look younger and more attractive, but how to go about it. One can live a healthy lifestyle--drink plenty of water, eat a diet of grapefruit and raw fish, and spend two hours a day practicing yoga. Or--for some it's *and*--there are always cosmetic procedures.

More and more of those fixer-uppers are being performed with lasers rather than plastic surgery, creams or chemicals. Want to zap a zit? Erase sun damage? Delete underarm hair? No longer are lasers a wave of the future. They can offer faster and less painful alternatives to the old methods, with less recovery time, to boot.

"Lasers are the standard way of treating things now," says Dr. Marc Avram, chief of dermatology at Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn, N.Y. "Though everything has risk, they tend to be pretty safe, are non-invasive, and about 80% to 90% of patients see dramatic improvement."

Before, people looking to permanently remove hair had to endure a long series of regular electrolysis treatments; lasers can reduce or eliminate hair in several short sessions, in which light beams are aimed at one small area of skin at a time to penetrate into the hair follicle and damage it. The treatment is meant to be permanent, but in some cases, hair might start to grow again.

Acne that once required daily prescription pills or creams can be treated in less cumbersome ways, also. Lasers are used on the entire face to treat already-apparent acne and to stop it from evolving.

According to the American Society for Dermatologic Surgery (ASDS), based in Rolling Meadows, Ill., cosmetic laser and light treatments are the most common reason women in the U.S. visit dermatologists and the second-most common reason for men, after skin cancer treatments.

Lasers consist of one or several beams of light aimed at a particular area of the skin to cut, seal or vaporize skin tissue, blood vessels or hair. The bright idea is that many of the procedures are non-invasive, meaning that patients are not wounded in the process. Other cosmetic procedures, such as face lifts and other plastic surgery, require cutting that could lead to scarring and long recovery periods.

"About ten years ago, the pendulum swung more toward people saying, 'I want the most aggressive procedure, and I'll accept the risk,' to now people saying, 'I don't want the down time, and I don't want to accept much risk at all,'" says Dr. Richard Fitzpatrick, director of cosmetic dermatology at La Jolla Cosmetic Surgery Centre in La Jolla, Calif.

Unfortunately, easy beauty doesn't come cheap, nor are the results always immediate. Many people do not see dramatic results until they have had a few treatments. And, depending on the procedure, clients can expect to shell out anywhere between a few hundred to a few thousand dollars. For instance, one treatment for body hair removal can cost up to \$2,000.

"You're paying for new, quality technology and treatment by someone who is professionally trained to use the lasers," says **Dr. David Goldberg**, a dermatologist in New York and New Jersey, as well as spokesman for ASDS.

Those looking for a miracle shouldn't hold their breath--doctors say as effective as lasers are, they are not magic wands.

"Lasers have really captured the public's imagination," so people tend to think lasers can do more than what's actually possible, says Dr. Gene Rubinstein, a dermatologist in Studio City, Calif. "People come in with intense scars and ask, 'Can you just take it off with a laser?'"

Of course, just as results from laser treatments vary from patient to patient, there can also be pain associated with certain treatments, as well as possible side effects, including short-term redness, burning and even hyper-pigmentation. Rubinstein says that the main key is choosing a trained professional who knows how to analyze each patient's type of skin.

"You're kind of treading a fine line--you want to be aggressive enough to get results, but you don't want side effects," he says. "You can have burning or cause scarring if you aren't careful. But on the flip side, if you're too conservative, then you don't get a result."

**Then again, with technology changing so quickly, you never know if a new laser will be created to make lasers error-free. Goldberg says the field is constantly progressing, and he projects that the next phase of cosmetic laser treatments will tackle cellulite and fat reduction. And just how will they work? He says, "That's the million-dollar question." ■**