

neal

living well after cancer

NEW HOPE

A variety of techniques can help minimize appearance of surgical scars

FOR OLD WOUNDS

AN UGLY, VISIBLE SCAR can be a difficult reminder of a cancer

surgery. But even a hidden scar can be itchy, painful or tight.

BOTH OF these types of scars have too much scar tissue, which results from a healing response stuck in overdrive. The normal healing process brings inflammation along with extra blood vessels to a wound, and new cells that produce collagen to replace lost skin. But a hypertrophic or keloid scar develops when there's too much collagen, "and then those initial inflammatory cells and blood vessels that come into play continue to hang around," says dermatologist Tina Alster, MD. "You have all the troops in there, and then they just don't clear out."

Alster, who heads the Washington Institute of Dermatologic Laser Surgery and is a clinical professor of dermatology at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., often uses laser treatment for hypertrophic or keloid scars. Lasers cause "just enough injury to get the process maturing in the way it should have normally," she says, "to clear out those blood vessels, to shut down on the inflammation and to exert a negative effect on collagen growth." Excess collagen contributes to the tightness of the scar.

"Given everything else that cancer survivors go through, this is the easiest and probably the happiest thing that they do," adds Alster. "It makes them feel better, and they see the results very quickly."



CONTRASTING SCARS



PHOTOS: TINA ALSTER, MD

The laser used to treat these types of scars is called a pulsed dye laser and emits light at a specific wavelength (585 nanometers) that is absorbed by the hemoglobin in red blood cells. The laser doesn't cut or abrade the skin. "This laser treatment is really not uncomfortable at all," says Alster. "During the treatment, there's a bit of a snapping sensation, followed by the feeling of a sunburn. And right afterward, it may look a little pink and swollen, but there is no crusting, scabbing or oozing."

The treatment lasts only a few minutes, depending on the size of the scar, and then it takes about six to eight weeks for the area to fully heal, although it may only be slightly reddened for a few days. Most people need two or three treatments, two months or so apart, before they see significant improvement in a scar. "Two to three treatments," says Alster, "will improve a scar an average of 50 to 80 percent."

Of course, patients can keep getting laser therapy if they want to see scars improve even more, but the last 20 to 50 percent is harder, she says, and no one will ever have a scar disappear. But because laser light is non-ionizing radiation, "it does not change cell structure in any malignant way. It's safer than going out in the sun for half a day," she says. The more laser treatments are performed, she adds, the better a scar responds. The scar continues to flatten, becoming more pliable with an improved surface texture.