

SELF

**SPECIAL
REPORT**
**Lasers &
Your Skin**

Laser Surgery Reduced My Acne Scars

Acne ravages the spirit as ruthlessly as the skin. For most of my life, the disease damaged my feelings about myself probably more than it did my appearance. From the first time my face broke out—when I was 14—my search for a cure dominated my life. Doctors bombarded my face with sunlamps and X rays and rubbed it with dry ice. I was plied with vitamins, antibiotics and, eventually, birth-control pills. I eliminated entire categories of food from my diet and I prowled drugstores for remedies.

Nothing worked until, at age 35, I finally got my skin under control with the potent anti-acne drug Accutane. The large, hard, angry red nodules that characterize serious cystic acne vanished, but the scars they caused remained. Acne cysts form deep in the skin's middle layers, in the fibrous collagen support structure. Often, after an inflamed cyst heals, the collagen in that spot does not grow back, leaving a depression called an atrophic scar. About a dozen deep atrophic scars marked my cheeks, along with many smaller, shallower, yet still visible depressions. Again, it seemed there wasn't much I could do, since dermabrasion and deep chemical peels are not completely successful at erasing deep atrophic scars, and both may cause additional scarring. Collagen injected to fill out depressions is soon absorbed by the body. "Your skin's not that bad," said a plastic surgeon. "Cover it with makeup."

In late 1994, I read about the UltraPulse CO₂ laser, introduced earlier that year as the newest weapon against wrinkles. A few innovative dermatologic surgeons were using it to reduce acne scars more effectively and with less risk than could be done with dermabrasion or chemical peels. The next day, I made an appointment with one of those specialists, **Washington, DC, dermatologist Tina Alster**, with whom I collaborated on a book.



Before



After

Laser resurfacing is far more grueling than popularly depicted. Because only my cheeks and chin were treated, I was not given the heavy sedation used for full-face procedures but was numbed by nerve blocks. Unfortunately, there were places where I could feel the laser hit my skin as it vaporized the upper layers with a pop and sizzle. That hurt. Afterward, my face was puffed up like a big red beach ball, and I was out of commission for a week, gulping Tylenol and applying ice packs, wet compresses and protective ointments to my very painful skin. For six more weeks, I looked as if I'd been badly burned; it took nine months for the lingering pinkness to fade, during which time I had to scrupulously avoid sun exposure.

My skin is still not perfect. Laser treatment typically improves the appearance of acne-scarred skin by 50 to 90 percent. In my case, the scars, while greatly reduced, are still discernible under close inspection. A second operation—recommended for very severe scarring—would bring further improvement. But I don't want or need that. For the first time in my adult life, the skin on my face appears clear, smooth—normal—to the casual observer. I go for days without wearing makeup—a freedom I hadn't known since childhood. For me, that's medical miracle enough.

LYDIA PRESTON is the coauthor, with **Tina Alster, M.D.**, of *The Essential Guide to Cosmetic Laser Surgery: The Revolutionary New Way to Erase Wrinkles, Age Spots, Scars, Birthmarks, Moles, Tattoos* (Alliance).