

IRONING AWAY WRINKLES

Ever since Dr. Tina Alster moved from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Washington to practice laser surgery in 1991, patients have come to her office overlooking Columbia Hospital for Women to have scars removed, tattoos erased, and birthmarks vaporized.

But now, as the power of lasers has become more predictable and accurate, she has started seeing a new class of patients who view the laser as a tool they can use to fight signs of aging without going under a surgeon's knife.

Lasers emit intense light beams that burn away layers of skin. Short-pulse lasers break the powerful rays into pulsating blasts, allowing doctors to focus energy on the very top layers of skin without burning the underlying tissue.

Using the wand-like laser, a doctor can ease crow's feet around a person's eyes and minimize pucker marks above the lips and frown lines between the eyebrows and across the forehead.

Alster, who helped develop the Surgilase laser she uses, says that a laser treatment can be completed during an hour-long session, including a pre-laser facial and post-treatment makeup lesson.

Lasers don't make all wrinkles disappear. "Although facelifts are still the treatment of choice for patients bothered by skin that droops or sags or has big folds," says Alster, "the laser does a better job erasing wrinkles around the eyes and the mouth. You get less of a 'pulled' look."

Experts say that lasers are safer than chemical peels and dermabrasion—which sands down pock marks and acne scars—because there is less risk of scarring. And they believe that lasers are a more dependable treatment for facial wrinkles than collagen and fat injections, which are temporary and can cause allergic reactions. "Surgilase will last until a patient develops new wrinkles," Alster says. Some patients experience a mild pinkness in the treated area that lasts for weeks but can be concealed with makeup.

Joan Worden, a Washington public-relations specialist who describes herself as "50-something plus," has undergone two Surgilase treatments, one for deep "squint" wrinkles and crow's feet surrounding her eyes, and another for a series of pucker lines above her upper lip.

She compares the mild discomfort she felt from the pulsating light rays to "snapping a rubber band on the skin." The resulting bruising and scabbing around her eyes, which lasts one to two weeks, was obvious enough that her husband joked that she should wear a sign assuring friends she hadn't been abused. After 10 days all the discoloration was gone, and now colleagues tell her how well-rested she looks.

Laser surgery isn't risk-free. The technique is not recommended for patients with dark skin tones, because the extra pigment in the skin can cause underlying tissue to blotch. And patients can be burned and scarred by inexperienced doctors.

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YOUNG AGAIN

THE BRIGHT PROMISE OF LASERS



Before laser surgery, there was no easy cure for crow's feet. But now short-pulse lasers are being used to minimize deep wrinkles at the outer edges of eyes and to erase fine lines. Shown here is a



patient before and after laser treatment. Laser surgery cannot help with bags under the eyes or drooping upper lids. Blepharoplasty, or eyelid surgery, helps those problems.

"The hardest thing is knowing what energy level to use for each patient," Alster says. "If a doctor has a target heated too long, you can burn the tissue."

Experts say that lasers are safer than chemical peels and dermabrasion because there is less risk of scarring. But laser surgery isn't risk-free.

Pulsating laser machines can cost as much as \$180,000 to buy and \$20,000 a year to maintain. Patients should make sure their doctors use a pulse laser for the treatment of facial wrinkles. Some doctors, experts say, use outdated, inappropriate machines to perform the delicate procedure. The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery recommends that patients choose a doctor who has privileges to perform laser-assisted surgery at an accredited hospital, even if the procedure is to be performed in a surgical center or office.

Physicians also should be willing to show prospective patients before-and-after photographs of people they have treated.

"There are a lot of doctors who call themselves laser surgeons," says Alster, who has taught laser-surgery techniques to doctors at Harvard. "I am astonished at how many of them ask to borrow my slides because they don't have their own pictures to show their patients."

Alster uses a temporary numbing cream to lessen the pain patients feel during laser sessions. Adrian also uses a topical anesthetic and, if working on the entire face, an intravenous sedative anesthesia. Alster is now involved in a Food and Drug Administration trial of a new freezing spray that numbs the skin in the seconds before the laser beam is applied. If it is approved for use, she says, the spray will make laser treatments even less painful.

Alster predicts that by the year 2000, multi-use laser machines will be developed, letting doctors use just one machine instead of four to treat scars, tattoos, birthmarks, and wrinkles. "Laser machines aren't cheap," she says. "Instead of a house I bought my first two lasers."

HOW TO LOOK TEN YEARS YOUNGER: NEW TECHNIQUES THAT REMOVE WRINKLES