



Beam me up

Lasers and lights are skin rejuvenation's new rays of hope. Elisabeth King examines their power to tighten and tone.

In the war on ageing, cosmetic surgery is the ultimate weapon when it comes to achieving dramatic results. But it's no easy option: for many, the mere thought of going under the knife, let alone the resulting pain and weeks of recovery, far outweighs any potential benefits. It's for this reason that skin-rejuvenation alternatives such as lasers, heat and light-based treatments have soared in popularity over the past five years. While many of these procedures require recovery time too, they're much

less invasive than surgery. According to The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, as many as 7.5 million of these procedures were performed in the US last year alone. And this figure is expected to double over the next three years.

Australians aren't far behind in their enthusiasm for a gentler way to hold back the years, says Lisa Sullivan-Smith, a director at The Clinic in Sydney. "Laser technology is advancing so fast that newer models completely outperform machines that are

only a few years old," she explains. "The Fraxel laser, for example, is all the rage in cosmetic surgery circles because it's such an excellent multi-tasker, achieving particularly good results with de-wrinkling the décolletage, removing acne scars and treating sun-damaged skin. It's nothing short of a godsend for people prone to deep wrinkling, such as smokers, who are not ideal candidates for laser resurfacing."

But even though the Fraxel is one of the latest ways to freshen up your complexion (and more), it's only one of a host of new cosmetic skin treatments – less risky, less painful and more effective – which is helping women and men to keep the signs of ageing at bay. "Early intervention is the key factor in using laser, light and radiofrequency therapies such as Thermage to maintain a youthful appearance," says Sullivan-Smith. "In fact, the best candidates for these treatments are people who have just the early signs of ageing and don't want or need a facelift."

WRINKLES

Billed as a one-stop shop for age-related skin conditions, the Fraxel laser hit the market in late 2004. Unlike traditional lasers, such as CO2 and Erbium: YAG, which remove the skin's top layers by vaporising them at a very high temperature, the Fraxel laser heats up columns of tissue, leaving healthy tissue in between. This process stimulates collagen production, and can result in smoother, fresher-looking skin in just over one week.

Since the Fraxel treats only 20 per cent of the skin's surface at a time, side effects typically include mild redness and swelling for two to three days, compared to the severe redness and scabbing associated with traditional laser treatment.

But Fraxel definitely doesn't fall into the lunchtime therapy category. Practitioners have to numb the face with a topical anaesthetic before treatment, and the level of pain involved depends on the patient's tolerance. Some report minimal discomfort while others consider the

treatment to be painful. No one, though, is arguing about the results. An average of three to five treatments is required (at about \$850 per session), but the effects can last for several years if you protect your skin from further damage.

HYPER-PIGMENTATION

The result of the body producing too much melanin, hyper-pigmentation is caused by excessive sun exposure, hormonal changes and drug reactions. It's Australia's number-one skin problem, affecting more

than 80 per cent of women over the age of 18, say dermatologists. The first choice for eliminating brown spots, says Daniel Dickson, managing director of Danné Montague-King Australia, is intense pulsed light (IPL) therapy. "IPL destroys hyper-pigmentation by heating up the melanin that causes it," explains Dickson. "It is very important for the therapist to properly diagnose the type of discolouration you want removed: freckles are by far the easiest condition to treat, often requiring just two treatments. Hormonal hyper-pigmentation is tougher to treat, however, usually requiring about three to five treatments to achieve a good result."

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Since IPL is a pigment-lightening therapy, experts recommend it for fair-skinned patients only. Its use on olive and dark complexions may result in areas of comparatively light pigmentation.

ACNE SCARRING

Similar to photo-damaged skin, acne scars contain reduced amounts of collagen, usually lack elasticity and have irregularly structured dermal fibres.

The Fraxel laser has brought renewed hope to those affected by acne scarring, which is traditionally one of the most difficult conditions to treat. Suitable for

scarring on the face, chest, shoulders and back in both teenagers and adults, the treatment removes damaged outer tissue and stimulates collagen reproduction to improve surface texture and tone. It aims to soften scars, even out skin discolouration and give the skin an overall smoother and tighter appearance. Depending on the severity of the scarring, you can even claim part of the cost of the treatment on Medicare. At around \$1200, the cost is higher than for wrinkle treatment, but the effect is permanent.

SAGGING SKIN

If you're not ready for a facelift, Thermage might offer the tightening you need. Using radiofrequency energy, Thermage penetrates deeply to access the middle layer of skin to tighten existing collagen and stimulate new collagen growth. However, Thermage is expensive (about \$4000 for a single treatment) and some women complain that it is painful. What's more, post-treatment redness and swelling can last anywhere from a few hours to a few days.

"Thermage is a wonderful treatment for tightening the skin around the jaw and neck," says Sullivan-Smith. "Eighty per cent of patients see an improvement immediately, but if you have severe lines you might have to wait up to four months for the full effect to be seen." Thermage is also excellent for tightening loose, sagging skin around the stomach and underarms (such as after pregnancy or dramatic weight loss).

ROSACEA

Thousands of Australian men and women suffer from this inflammatory skin condition that affects the nose, cheeks, chin and, less commonly, the eyes. Symptoms range from redness and small visible blood vessels to bumps and pimples, and

can fluctuate in severity. One of the best treatments available for this condition is the Sciton BBL (broadband laser). According to Kathleen Hoskins, a registered nurse at The Eden Institute of Plastic and Cosmetic Surgery in Sydney, BBL gently heats the top layer of skin with pulsed light, which collapses the broken blood vessels and causes the redness symptomatic of rosacea to disappear.

Like the Fraxel laser, the Sciton BBL is a multi-tasker and also removes hair, port-wine birthmarks, pigmentation and

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even spider veins in the legs (when used in conjunction with other lasers).

"The Sciton broadband laser's filter system allows practitioners to have more precise control over the depth of treatment and coverage area, so we can customise the therapy for consistent results," explains Hoskins. "What most people comment on, however, is that BBL is much less painful than other laser treatments." Both Fraxel and BBL are also being used to soften wrinkles and bags under the eyes. Treatment for rosacea with Sciton BBL costs about \$330/half face and around for \$440/full face. H&G

BEFORE YOU CHOOSE A LASER TREATMENT

- For safety's sake, always make sure that the doctor or therapist has performed a minimum of 10 procedures under the direct supervision of a specialist.
- Ensure that you completely understand all aspects of the procedure. Therapists should be able to answer all of your questions fully.
- Request a patch test for skin sensitivity. Although rare, side effects include blistering and uneven pigmentation.