

ON YOUR FEET

Daily Breeze - Torrance, Calif.

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Date: Apr 2, 2007

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As gentle spa music filled the operating room, nurse practitioner Lethi Lam slowly ran a red laser over the bright blue goo covering the face of her 35-year-old patient.

"I can feel it, but it's not bad," said the woman undergoing the procedure, as a nurse held out a fan to cool her skin.

The patient was in the middle of a session with the new Fraxel laser, a cosmetic treatment that involves heating deep layers of the skin to make the surface look more healthy and even. The procedure is among the new "minimally invasive" techniques gaining popularity in cosmetic surgery offices.

"What we see in the cosmetic surgery area is that people want to have great results but they don't want to have any healing time," said Dr. Susan Goodlerner, a Torrance dermatologist who offers minimally invasive treatments such as injectables and lasers. "They want to do something for their face and maybe take one or two days off of work, but no extended time. This is trying to address that need or that desire for people."

The Fraxel laser treatment works by targeting heat to the deep microthermal zone of the dermis and leaving surrounding areas untouched. This allows for the body to grow new, healthier skin, and eliminates common problems such as acne scarring or redness. A full treatment involves three to five sessions over several months, at a cost of about \$700 to \$1,000 per session.

Before the procedure, the patient is given a topical anesthetic and a blue gel is applied to the face, helping the laser pick out contours. During the procedure, the laser is hooked to a computer that determines the energy level, treatment level and the number of times the laser should be passed across the face, all of which vary by patient, with different skin types responding differently to the laser.

Dr. Brian Kinney, a Century City plastic surgeon and member of the American Society for Plastic Surgeons Emerging Trends Committee, said the Fraxel treatment is an improvement over past laser techniques, "because it stimulates collagen by creating a 'skip,' or checkerboard pattern, of treatment without as much blistering, redness or skin peeling."

Kinney said Fraxel is often compared to another laser, Thermage, but the two are different in that Thermage uses radio waves instead of light waves to heat the skin.

Lam, who performs the Fraxel treatments at Goodlerner's office, said the pain level involved with laser treatments is subjective, but some patients have compared the feeling to a rubber band being snapped against their skin. To prevent overheating, a fan is held near the patient's face while the laser is in use.

The first few days after the treatment, Goodlerner said, the patient's face might look and feel like it's been sunburned, with redness, swelling or pain. Some patients are prescribed a pain medicine, but some do well with aspirin, she said. Most are back to normal within two or three days.

Kinney said the Fraxel laser is probably too mild to badly burn a patient. At the same time, he said, "It may not achieve enough change to satisfy every patient."

He said Thermage, Fraxel and other noninvasive treatments are similar in that "everyone wants maximum result with minimum impact."

Kinney acknowledged that there is always a "newer" or "better" treatment around the corner.

"While it is certainly true that [Fraxel] is the best for now, no procedure will prevent the march of time," he said.

Barbara Mignosi, 52, who has undergone two Fraxel treatments in the last four months, said she was thrilled with the results.

"I do a lot of volunteer work and I'm out in public and I work two jobs, in the hospital and in the school district, so I want my skin to look its best," Mignosi said.

She said she was able to get right back to her life after the procedure, which she said took about two hours and wasn't very painful.

"For busy professionals, it's a great solution," Mignosi said. "In Southern California, in the South Bay and the Beach Cities, everyone wants to look really good."

In addition to laser procedures, some patients get injections to smooth the skin.

Goodlerner uses Radiesse, a recently approved wrinkle filler that is injected deep into the skin. She said it is similar to the more common Restalyne, but requires smaller doses and contains a calcium element, making it almost like "a liquid form of bone."

Goodlerner said injections ranging from about \$350 to \$1,000 each.

"I think most people who have cosmetic procedures are your neighbor next door," said Goodlerner, a clinical associate professor of dermatology at Harbor UCLA Medical Center. "In terms of women, we have policewomen, teachers, people who are retired, young mothers that want to take care of themselves."

And although cosmetic procedures are traditionally seen as a female treatment, Goodlerner said Fraxel also is attracting many male patients.

"We see men who are in the business world who feel like they're older than the other people in their business," Goodlerner said.

Goodlerner advises prospective cosmetic surgery patients to seek out a board-certified dermatologist who has experience with the procedure, and to ask the doctor about potential risks and benefits.

She also said patients need to educate themselves and to have realistic expectations -- to know that the procedures are helpful, but won't be magical.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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