

The Future of Your Face

NEW LASER TECHNOLOGY IS A POTENT WEAPON IN THE WAR AGAINST AGING. IS IT RIGHT FOR YOU? BY SUSAN SOMMERS

Dismayed by lines and wrinkles, brown spots and blotchy, uneven skin color? New techniques in laser surgery offer a ray of hope in turning back the clock to reverse these signs of aging and sun damage. The question is: Are they right for you? To help you decide, we've examined the three most promising procedures people are talking about now—each with its own risks and rewards.

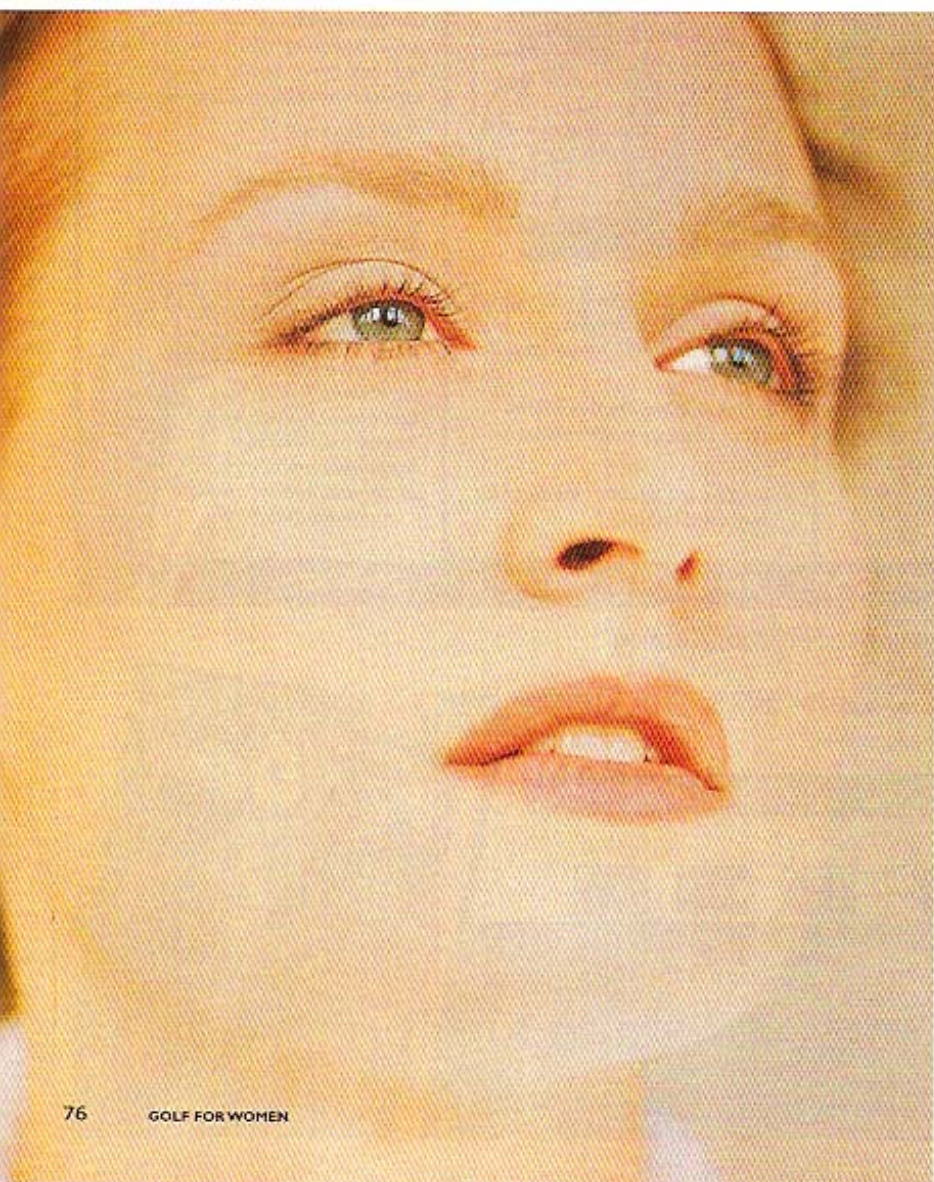
OBJECTIVE: REMOVING WRINKLES

Laser skin resurfacing, performed on the face, hands and neck, is the most comprehensive cosmetic laser procedure available and provides the most dramatic change. All but the most profound wrinkles are ironed out, and blotches and brown spots disappear. In addition, new collagen fibers form so that skin becomes tighter as well as smoother, softer and clearer.

Two types of lasers are capable of effecting this change: The carbon dioxide (CO₂) laser is used to treat more extensive problems and deeper facial lines and wrinkles. The Erbium:YAG laser, which doesn't penetrate as deeply, is used to remove minor photoaging and superficial-to-moderate wrinkles. Advantages of the Erbium:YAG are less redness and faster recovery.

■ **WHAT TO EXPECT** Usually performed under local anesthesia, laser resurfacing has been likened to the creation of a controlled burn. A wandlike laser, which emits a burst of high-intensity light, is passed over the skin in short, parallel strokes. As the light beam touches the skin, it vaporizes a thin layer of tissue, leaving behind a mist of pale gray dust. The ashy residue is then wiped off to reveal smooth, unblemished skin.

■ **RISK/RECOVERY** When the procedure is performed by a board-certified physician with extensive laser experience, the risks are minimal. Scarring is about one percent, which is equivalent to chemical peels and dermabrasion. The incidence of developing hyperpigmentation, or blotchy brown spots, is 20 percent to 30 percent, but this can be controlled by treating the skin with bleaching cream before and after the procedure. Women with light skin are ideal candidates, since they usually experience fewer pigmentation problems. Those with darker >



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or olive complexions have a greater risk of pigment changes—both darkening and lightening—but seem to have fewer problems with the Erbium:YAG.

Immediately after surgery, you'll look like your skin was burned—your eyes may be swollen and your skin bright red—and your face, hands or neck will feel tight and hot. Initially, a dressing is applied and ice packs are placed on the affected areas. After 24 hours, the dressing is removed and skin is kept covered by ointment, often petroleum jelly, as a crust forms. After seven to 10 days, enough new skin is usually generated to cover redness with makeup. But beware: Redness, which is more profound and long-lasting with the CO₂ laser, can remain for six months or more.

You must avoid the sun completely for two to six weeks after the procedure, depending on your skin type. After this initial recovery period you may go in the sun but not without sunblock.

■ COST \$3,500 to \$10,000.

OBJECTIVE: REMOVING BROWN SPOTS

Q-switched Ruby or Q-switched Nd:YAG lasers target and destroy pigmented areas (brown spots, blotches) without affecting the surrounding skin. If wrinkles are not a concern, or you don't want to go through the expense or discomfort of resurfacing, this is a good option.

■ WHAT TO EXPECT A topical numbing cream is spread over the skin, then the laser is directed at the discoloration. Pain is minimal—a sharp stinging as the needle zaps the spots. The procedure may have to be performed several times—four to six

weeks apart—to get the desired results. Any dark spot should first be examined by a physician to rule out the possibility that it's a melanoma or other skin cancer.

■ RISK/RECOVERY Risks are minimal and recovery is rapid, though you must avoid the sun until healed. Red spots and scabs form and last a week or two.

■ COST \$200 to \$1,000.

OBJECTIVE: SOFTENING THE SKIN

A light noninvasive peel performed with the mild SoftLight laser minimizes fine lines and sweeps off dryness and surface debris on the face, throat and back of the hands, leaving skin softer, smoother, and brighter. It's ideal for those whose skin is dull, dry and lackluster. It doesn't eradicate brown spots, but they'll be less visible.

■ WHAT TO EXPECT A solution of carbon particles is applied to the skin, which the beam of light lifts off along with the skin's uppermost layers. Dr. Jim Baral, a dermatologist in New York City, suggests a series of between three and six treatments for optimum smoothness and brightness.

■ RISK/RECOVERY There's virtually no pain or downtime, although skin may look pink and slightly irritated for a day or so, much as it would with a deep facial. A cortisone cream can be used to calm the skin.

■ COST \$160 to \$630.

A caveat: Though lasers do reverse sun damage, reexposure to the sun renews the aging process. As Dr. Jeffrey S. Yager, director of the Plastic Surgery Center in New York City, cautions, "Once you've reaped the benefits of laser surgery, be smart and realize the sun is your skin's enemy." ☺

FINDING A SPECIALIST

Look for a physician who is not only board-certified in a specialty dealing with cosmetic surgery—a plastic surgeon, dermatologist or ear-nose-and-throat surgeon—but is also experienced in laser surgery. When you meet, ask how long he or she has been working with lasers and whether you can see before and after photographs of patients who have undergone the procedure you're interested in. For a referral, call any one of these three organizations: The American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, 800-635-0635; The American Society for Dermatologic Surgery, 800-441-2737; or The American Academy of Facial, Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, 800-332-3223.—S.S.