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LASERS AND LIGHTS: HOW WELL DO THEY TREAT ACNE?

Lasers and other light therapies may seem like the perfect acne treatment. Just beam a light to make the acne disappear.

Using them is actually a bit more involved and the results less predictable, even in the skilled hands of a dermatologist. Still, these treatments can be an effective part of an acne treatment plan.

The following explains what you can expect from an in-office acne treatment that uses a laser or other light treatment.



1.

Before and after 3 laser treatments for acne: This 29-year-old man has good clearing, but you still see some acne.

Most people see clearing, but it's not 100%.

Studies show that lasers and other light treatments can reduce acne. Rarely can these treatments alone clear acne. To give you the best results, your dermatologist may recommend using another acne treatment, such as medicine that you apply to your skin.

2. Results vary from person to person.

Right now, there's no way to know who will see clearer skin and how much the skin will clear when treated with a laser or other light treatment.

3. To get results, most people need a series of treatments.

Several studies have shown that multiple treatments deliver significantly better results than a single treatment.

4. It takes time to see results.

In studies, researchers continually find that patients see the best results weeks after the last treatment. In one study, patients treated with a type of light therapy called photodynamic therapy had 50% fewer spots at the end of the 4-week treatment period. Twelve weeks after the last treatment, they had a 72% reduction.

5. Follow-up treatments may be necessary.

Results from lasers and light therapies are generally long lasting. To maintain results, however, patients often need follow-up treatments once or twice a year.

6. Side effects are possible with lasers and other light treatments.

Redness and swelling are common after treatment with many lasers and light treatments. Some patients say their skin stings or burns. These are usually mild and disappear within a few hours or by the next day. Other side effects are rare; however, they can occur. These include lingering pain, burns, or blisters. Changes in your skin color and scarring are also possible. Getting treatment from a board-certified dermatologist who frequently uses lasers can help prevent these side effects.

7. Patients need to follow their dermatologist's instructions carefully.

To help their patients get the best results and avoid side effects, dermatologists give instructions both before and after treatment. It's essential to do everything as instructed. For example, after having photodynamic therapy, patients must avoid sunlight for 48 hours.

8. Good acne skincare helps deliver the best results.

Acne-prone skin requires gentle skin care to prevent new breakouts. You'll find what dermatologists recommend at, [Acne: Tips for Managing](#).

The future looks bright for treating acne with lasers and lights

These treatments show great promise in treating acne. Some patients with severe acne cysts have seen clearing for years when laser therapy was added to their treatment plan.

More studies are needed to know what will work best for most people. In the meantime, if you think a laser or light treatment can improve your acne, you should talk with a dermatologist. This doctor can tell you if you'd be a good candidate for this treatment.

Types of lasers and lights used to treat acne



Dermatologists use a variety of light and laser therapies to treat acne.

No one laser or light treatment can treat pimples, blackheads, whiteheads, acne cysts, and acne nodules. That's why different types of lasers and light therapies are used to treat acne. The following explains what the different types of lasers and lights can and cannot treat.

Blue, red, and blue + red light devices: Called visible light because you can see the colors, these devices can treat pimples. Visible light is not effective against blackheads, whiteheads, acne cysts, or nodules.

At-home devices: The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved some visible-light LED devices (blue, red, and blue + red light devices) for at-home use. These devices are less powerful than the ones a dermatologist uses. As stated above, visible light can only treat pimples.

There is no way to know who will see results. If you want to give it a try, you'll need to use an at-home device twice a day. Some devices you need to use for 30 to 60 minutes, twice a day, for 4 to 5 weeks.

Infrared light: The FDA has approved this type of light to treat pimples, including those that develop on the back. Infrared light cannot treat blackheads, whiteheads, cysts, or nodules.

Photodynamic therapy (PDT): During PDT, a solution that makes the skin more sensitive to light is applied to acne-prone skin. The solution must sit on the skin for a while, between 15 minutes and 3 hours. Next, a dermatologist uses a laser or light device to treat the skin.

PDT therapy shows great promise in helping to treat severe acne. Some patients who had acne cysts have been clear for years after receiving PDT from a dermatologist.

Photopneumatic therapy: This treatment combines an intense pulsed light (IPL) laser with a gentle vacuum. It works by removing excess oil and dead skin cells from clogged pores. It is FDA-approved to treat blackheads, whiteheads, and some pimples. It cannot treat acne nodules or cysts.

Image

Before and after laser treatments for acne: Image used with permission of the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*: *J Am Acad Dermatol*. 2012; 66:626-33.

References

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