

See the Light

Unclear about the difference between laser and IPL treatments? Read on for a complete rundown

By Melissa Brazier

Although the continual advent of new hair-removal technologies is giving estheticians and clients more service options, it can also lead to a bit of confusion—especially when the technologies seem to be based on the same principles. Laser and IPL (a.k.a. Intense Pulse Light) treatments, for example, both use light energy to destroy hair follicles, leaving many estheticians unclear as to the difference between them.

According to Sharon Edgley, clinic manager at Toronto's Evolution Laser and Rejuvenation Centre, the difference between laser and IPL is the wavelength of light energy that is produced by whatever machine the esthetician is using.

It's this wavelength that determines the rate at which the target area is going to be affected and how much the surrounding tissue will be impacted. IPL, for instance, offers a broad spectrum of light with various wavelengths, usually in quick bursts of light (like a flash on a camera). This makes it a fast treatment suitable for broad areas like legs. Lasers tend to use a single, specific wavelength, making it ideal for smaller areas or customized treatment plans.

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How do you choose a service?

Choosing between laser and IPL treatment will always be based on the individual client. The first step is assessing skin type. “Most of the IPL devices have preset limiting parameters, which can only be used on clients who meet the Fitzpatrick skin type I to III, from pale white to slightly olive skin,” Edgley explains, adding that anyone with a skin type IV or more is not an ideal candidate since darker pigmented skin may over-absorb light and cause burning or blanching.

Next, estheticians need to look at the size and location of the area they are treating. Edgley says full back, for example, can be done much faster with an IPL machine, as the hand pieces are usually larger and no overlapping is required. Stacey Johnston, president of Esthetics Plus, a distributor of professional beauty products in Edmonton, agrees, adding that generally IPL device heads are up to eight times larger than their laser counterparts.

A client’s pain tolerance also needs to be considered. Edgley notes that most clients prefer laser on their face and other sensitive areas as it’s usually less painful than IPL. Lastly, look at the density (coarse to fine), colour (blonde to dark) and growth stage (anagen, catagen or telegen) of the hair to decide which machine will work best.

What are the pros and cons of IPL versus laser?

Since the first IPL machine hit the market in the mid-90s, there have been tremendous advancements. Johnston says, “It is estimated that 85 per cent of an IPL patient’s hair is removed after only one treatment. There’s more accuracy with IPL than ever before, and with less potential damage to surrounding tissues, the side affects are minimized to a little swelling, if any at all.”

On the other hand, the lasers Edgley’s clinic uses suit a wider variety of clients, allowing hair removal on all skin types. Plus, the spot size of the laser is smaller, making it more precise for minor areas like underarms or bikini lines. Some laser machines also come with a built-in cooling element, making the treatment less painful. Edgley adds that she often uses a combination of treatments to achieve the desired results.

Johnston notes that both treatments have side affects, such as swelling, skin turning pink or red and blistering. The side affects specific to lasers include skin discoloration, hyperpigmentation, burning and/or scarring. IPL patients can experience temporary pigmentation and sometimes bruising. However, proper education by the esthetician can help avoid these adverse affects.

What training is needed?

It used to be that only physicians could operate laser equipment. Not anymore. However, at the present time there are no training regulations set in place when it comes to offering laser or IPL treatments. Johnston suggests that anyone looking into laser or IPL education should have a strong esthetics background or be a registered skin therapist. She also adds that it’s essential to receive training specific to the manufacturer of the machine you will be using, as components and settings vary. **S**



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