

Intense Pulsed Light (IPL) Treatment

What Is IPL Treatment?

Intense pulsed light (IPL) therapy, also known as a photo facial, is a way to improve the color and texture of your skin without surgery. It can undo some of the visible damage caused by sun exposure -- called photoaging. You may notice it mostly on your face, neck, hands, or chest.

IPL may help if you have red, brown, or splotchy skin because of a health condition.

IPL vs. laser

Both IPL and laser treatments can be used to improve a variety of skin issues. The main difference is that IPL therapy is gentler on the skin and usually requires more sessions than laser therapy for comparable results. Laser treatment is more intense and recovery is longer. It can achieve more noticeable results from fewer procedures. However, unlike lasers, an IPL device sends out more than one wavelength of pulsating light. IPL can treat a range of skin conditions at the same time. Certain skin issues may respond better to IPL or laser. Your dermatologist can tell you which one is a better match for your needs.

How IPL Treatment Works

When the skin is heated, your body gets rid of the unwanted cells, and that gets rid of the issue you're being treated for. It can treat a range of skin conditions at the same time.

After IPL, you may look younger because your skin tone is more even. And since the light doesn't hurt other tissues, you can get better quickly.

For the treatment, you should seek a qualified therapist. In some cases, a nurse or physician assistant might be able to do it. Either way, find someone who's skilled in IPL therapy.

IPL uses light energy to target a certain color in your skin.

What Does IPL Treat?

It works best if you have pale or light brown skin. Talk to your dermatologist if you want to lessen or get rid of:

- Acne
- Birthmarks
- Stretch marks
- Liver or age spots
- Broken blood vessels
- Brown spots, also called liver or age spots
- Dark spots from hormonal changes
- Discolored skin
- Fine wrinkles
- Freckles
- Redness from rosacea
- Scars
- Spider veins
- Unwanted hair

Who Shouldn't Get IPL Treatment?

Talk to your therapist first if you:

- Are pregnant
- Have a skin condition
- Have a sunburn
- Take medication for other conditions such as blood thinners or the acne drug isotretinoin, better known as Accutane

IPL isn't a good idea if you:

- Are sensitive to light
- Have recently tanned your skin using sunlight, tanning beds, or tanning creams
- Might have skin cancer
- Use a retinoid cream
- Are very dark-skinned
- Have a skin resurfacing disorder
- Have severe scarring
- Have keloid scar tissue

On the day of your appointment, avoid using perfume, makeup, and scented products that can irritate your skin.

Does IPL cause cancer?

Research shows that IPL is safe and does not cause cancer. IPL has been used for over 30 years without raising concerns about increasing the risk of skin or other types of cancer.

Does IPL Work?

How well IPL works can depend on what you want the treatment to fix. Some concerns you want addressed might include:

Redness. After one to three treatments, light therapy can get rid of 50%-75% of broken blood vessels for most people. They could completely go away. While treated veins don't come back, new ones might show up later.

Sun damage. You may see a 70% reduction in brown spots and redness caused by ultraviolet (UV) rays.

Hair removal. You'll get the most benefit if you have light skin and dark hair. It may not work at all if you have dark skin or blond hair.

Dry eyes. Usually, dry eyes are first treated with over-the-counter or prescription eye drops and lifestyle changes. But IPL may help if other therapies aren't working. You are likely to see a decrease of 25%-50% or more in your symptoms.

Acne. IPL may help if you have acne or the scarring it causes. Research is ongoing, but you are likely to have a significant reduction in acne symptoms, with over 90% of people seeing positive results with IPL. You may need multiple sessions to notice a difference.

Rosacea. If rosacea causes your face to flush, IPL can be a good alternative to laser therapy. You may have better results if:

- You're under 40.
- Your condition is moderate to severe.

Side Effects of IPL Treatment

IPL treatment is safe when done by a trained technician. But it could cause hormonal brown spots to flare up. You could have other unwanted side effects.

Your skin could:

- Scar
- Hurt
- Swell
- Bleed
- Become infected
- Change color
- Get crusty
- Blister

Talk to your dermatologist if you feel sick after your treatment or your symptoms get worse.

Side effects of IPL hair removal

IPL hair removal may cause short-term side effects. These include:

- Skin sensitivity
- Mild discomfort or pain, such as stinging or feeling like you have a sunburn
- Skin discoloration, such as slight redness

IPL Procedure

Before the procedure, don't:

- Tan in the sun, in a tanning bed, or with tanning creams for 4 weeks before treatment
- Wax, or get a chemical peel or [collagen shots](#) for 2 weeks before
- Wear perfume, makeup, deodorant, or any skin irritants
- Take aspirin or another drug that can make you bleed more
- Take any medication that will make you sun-sensitive (for example, the antibiotic [doxycycline](#))

Once you're ready for the treatment, a technician or dermatologist will rub gel on your clean skin. You'll wear dark glasses to protect your eyes. The handheld IPL device will go right on your body. The session will probably last 20-30 minutes. Large areas could take an hour or more.

While most people are fine with the light pulses, the treatment could sting a little. It might feel like someone is snapping a rubber band on you. Your dermatologist can give you a numbing cream to put on 30-60 minutes before treatment starts.

IPL Recovery

It may feel like you have a sunburn for 4-6 hours after you're finished. Ice packs or a cool washcloth can help you feel better.

Your skin may be red or bruised for a day or two. Some of your brown spots may get darker, but they should peel off within a few weeks.

While you heal:

- Don't put on makeup if your skin hurts.
- Use moisturizing lotion.

- Protect yourself with sunscreen. Make sure it has an SPF of at least 30 and a physical blocker such as zinc. Reapply it every 2 hours, even if it's not sunny outside.
- Wash your face with a cleanser for sensitive skin.

Your therapist can tell you when it's safe to return to your normal skin care routine. It might take a week.