

Intense pulsed light myth busters

Does it really work? By Dr Ivan Tan Khee Hon

Myth 1

IPL is a type of laser

Intense Pulsed Light (IPL) is a broad spectrum light (multi-coloured) whereas Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation (LASER) is a narrow or single spectrum light (monochromatic or single coloured). Each wavelength of light energy illicit a specific response from the skin when applied. Since IPL has many wavelengths, it is possible to get many effects like collagen stimulation, pigment removal, hair removal and vein removal in a single treatment. However since its power is spread over all these different wavelengths, it is not possible to do a single function particularly well. Laser, on the other hand, is more precise in its function and with all its effect focused on a single wavelength; it can penetrate deep and do its intended treatment really well. IPL is a good treatment for general improvement of the skin whereas Laser is good to target specific problems.

Myth 2

IPL is safer than laser

IPL is not necessarily safer than Laser. Depending on the power of the IPL machine, the light generated can be more powerful than lasers. Skin burns and eye damage can occur with IPL as with Laser. Inappropriate use of IPL can also bring out hidden pigmentation in the skin. Unfortunately, since IPL is not a Laser, it is not being regulated by the authorities leading to widespread use of such equipment throughout the beauty industry. Fortunately most medical grade IPL machines (with sufficient power) are restricted to the medical community by the manufacturer.

Myth 3

IPL does not work

There are many less known IPL machines in the market now because of the hype IPL created. Most of these machines fail to deliver results because they are just not made with the right specification and power. Either they don't have enough power to achieve anything or they are made so powerful that they are dangerous. They quote results published by reputed manufacturer of medical grade IPL machines but they themselves are unable to achieve the results with their machines.

Myth 4

IPL hair removal is not permanent

This common misconception found its root in the many inferior machines found throughout the beauty industry. The lack of clinical knowledge of hair growth and low powered IPL machines deliver poor results. At best, they stun the hair follicles to delay hair growth but the hair eventually grows back. With a good IPL machine and experience, results of hair removal are comparable if not better than Laser hair removal.

Myth 5

IPL treatment is very painful

IPL treatment can be a little uncomfortable but are no longer as painful as they were when IPL was first started 10 years ago. Recent advances in technology also made it much less painful nowadays. Having some sensation in the skin is an indication that the skin is being stimulated. Beware of treatments that are too comfortable

(unless it is used with special technology) because they may be sub optimal treatments. Ways in which we make IPL treatments less painful include topical numbing cream, skin suction and contact cooling.

Myth 6

IPL causes skin cancer

This was a major concern when IPL was first introduced. Over the last 10 years, many studies have confirmed the benefits of IPL treatments for the skin and one of which is the reversal of sun damaged skin. They found that pre-cancerous skin cells actually revert back to normal when exposed to IPL treatments. These findings totally refuted the fear of IPL causing cancer. In theory, only the ultra violet radiation of light damages skin and eventually causes skin cancer. Good IPL machines use good filters to block off the ultra violet radiation to make treatment even safer.

Myth 7

IPL thins the skin

IPL is a non-ablative treatment (meaning it does not burn the surface of the skin) so it does not thin the skin. In fact, by boosting collagen in the skin, IPL actually "thickens" the skin making it firmer and more elastic. Since the protective outer layer of the skin is still intact, there is also no need to specially avoid the sun as with some chemical skin peel or Laser treatments.

Myth 8

IPL is a "passé" technology

IPL is here to stay. Since its introduction, IPL treatments have been getting more and more popular due to its excellent results with minimal downtime. Many so called "new technology" like VPL, FPL, I2PL etc are in essence just IPL treatments with fanciful names for marketing purpose.



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