

This Cosmetic Treatment Can Destroy Early Skin Cancer

Turns out, one of the most common anti-aging lasers can help fight skin cancer, too.



Cosmetic treatments and skin cancer treatments don't usually overlap, but one particular laser straddles the line between both worlds. Fraxel, a non-invasive laser most often used—and known—for anti-aging, can also destroy pre-cancer and early skin cancers. While the technology has been around for the while, a 2013 [study published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology*](#) reinforced its practice, and it's continued to grow in popularity as an early and pre-skin cancer treatment since.

More specifically, it's an effective treatment for actinic keratosis (AK), the most common pre-cancerous skin condition, affecting 58 million Americans, according to the [Skin Cancer Foundation](#). AK shows up as rough, red, scaly patches, and is caused entirely by sun exposure and UV damage (insert friendly reminder to wear sunscreen here), which is why it most commonly develops on sun-exposed areas such as the face, scalp, ears, chest, arms, and upper back, says dermatologist Jennifer Chwalek, M.D., a skin rejuvenation laser expert at [Union Square Laser Dermatology](#). (Related: [People Are Forgetting to Apply Sunscreen On a Very Important Part of Their Body](#).)

Left untreated, AK can turn into a type of skin cancer known as [squamous cell carcinoma](#); luckily, the condition is easily treated. Common treatments include topical chemotherapy, photodynamic treatments, freezing, and surgery—though Fraxel offers unique advantages compared to these more traditional options.

First, a quick science lesson on the technology at hand: "Fraxel creates microscopic zones of injury in the skin, stimulating a wound healing cascade that ultimately results in increased collagen production and photorejuvenation," explains Dr. Chwalek. Hence why it's choice for those looking for less wrinkled, more youthful skin (See: [Why Lasers and Light Treatments are Really Good For Your Skin](#)), though that healing response is what also helps treat the AK.

It's worth noting, however, that not all Fraxel lasers are the same; the different types feature different wavelengths for slightly different benefits. "Fraxel is the Ferrari of laser resurfacing," says celebrity cosmetic dermatologist [Paul Jarrod Frank, M.D.](#) "The device offers a lot of versatility and is very customizable with the ability to go through every layer of skin. Fraxel Thulium is the one that can effectively treat actinic keratosis, because it focuses especially on sun damage in the top layers of the epidermis where squamous cell carcinomas start. Other Fraxels work on other layers of the skin, like the dermis."

So why Fraxel over one of the other treatments? "It's the only treatment that not only treats the pre-cancerous actinic keratosis, but also treats the cosmetic aspects of sun damage," says Dr. Frank. In other words, it will get rid of the potentially dangerous spots *and* make your skin look better, too. Those added benefits coupled with minimal downtime—about four days of skin redness—is what makes it so popular compared to the alternative, he adds. (Plus, the procedure only takes about 15 minutes and only requires topical anesthesia for numbing.) Most importantly, it's effective. The [JAAD](#) study found that the participants had over an 86 percent reduction in facial AK lesions six months after receiving treatment. "Fraxel Thulium can absolutely help prevent actinic keratosis-induced skin cancer," says Dr. Frank. "It not only treats existing spots, but it also prevents new ones from forming."

Still, most insurance companies don't consider Fraxel a traditional treatment for actinic keratosis and won't cover it, so keep in mind that you'll likely have to pay out-of-pocket. "Because there are cheaper options available, and because Fraxel has huge cosmetic effect as well, it's extremely unlikely that insurance will ever cover it," he adds. Prices vary based on where you live; last year, the average cost was more than \$1,000 per treatment, according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons' [Plastic Surgery Statistics Report](#), and Dr. Frank recommends one to two treatments initially, then yearly treatments afterward.

Dr. Chwalek also underscores that it's imperative the laser treatment be performed by a board-certified physician with an expertise in laser surgery. "If it's done too aggressively or with poor technique, it can result in scarring and dyspigmentation," she cautions.

Above all, remember that the best offense is a good defense—your best strategy, as always, is to protect your skin by wearing a broad-spectrum sunscreen with at least an SPF 30 EVERY. SINGLE. DAY. And don't forget to book an [annual skin check with your dermatologist](#), ideally at the end of the summer.