



home work

Who needs a dermatologist when you can kick-start collagen and fade sun damage chez vous?

Rebecca Traister investigates do-it-yourself devices.

Photographed by Steven Klein.

I'm sitting in dermatologist Lisa Airan, M.D.'s, office on the Upper East Side, about to thrust my bare face in front of a curved surface covered with zillions of small yellow lights, as if a Lite-Brite had mated with HAL from 2001. It's the GentleWaves machine, which used LED (light-emitting diode) technology to promote production of collagen and elastin and reduce fine lines, sun damage, and other visible signs of aging. I lean into the GentleWaves, and the bulbs flash grandly for exactly 37 seconds. I return to work and forget about my brief trip to Airan's office. That night I go to brush my teeth and do a literal double take when I catch my reflection: I look awesome! And I'm not the only one who thinks so. I get compliments for the next week. I swear that after 37 seconds of pulsing light, my face is brighter, tighter, and smoother. I also swear that if they made one of these widgets for home use, I would never leave the house.

That's precisely the conviction that skin-care companies are banking on as they flood the market with new, do-it-yourself devices that promise to bring high-tech services previously available only within the gleaming white walls of expensive medical pavilions straight to your living room. Dermatologists can now do pretty much anything short of reupholstering you with the skin of an eight-year-old, and they want to put the power to obliterate acne, wrinkles, blackheads, and unwanted hair literally in the palm of your hand.

the box; Electric currents? Bright lights that require goggles? I'm too tired to figure out responsibly how to manipulate the machines without burning off my own eyelids or electrocuting my house cats.

When at last I get it together, I gravitate toward those gadgets that look unimposing, like objects in my medicine cabinet or tool kit. First up is the Clarisonic face brush (\$195) an apparatus made by one of the inventors of Sonicare that looks like an electric toothbrush on steroids. Purr. You can keep it in your shower, using it every day for one minute. The whirring bristles feel great as they scrub the grime from every facial crevice. Airan tells me that if I use it on the back of my arms, the Clarisonic will help clear up the little bumps, keratosis pilaris, that I've always had there. Sure enough, after two weeks, the bumps diminish. Airan says she used to feel silly recommending the Clarisonic to patients—"like I was trying to sell them one of those stupid devices from an infomercial," she says—but they always came back raving. It has a logical, visceral appeal: It brushes the dirt and dead skin off your face.

Similarly sturdy in premise is the other appliance to which I am attracted like a moth to a flame: the Panasonic Pore Cleanser with Mist (\$50). I fall for this nifty device from the moment I feel it move over my nose, supposedly vacuuming blackheads with its rigid blue suction cup. Its doctor's-office equivalent is the Isolaz,

I have visions of bathing in pulsing red and green light morning, noon, and night for the next four weeks.

I am, naturally, ecstatic when a humongous box of high-tech goodies arrives at my apartment. I have a month to test them, and I am determined to eke out every benefit, applying them all, simultaneously if possible, to every inch of my body. I have visions of bathing in pulsing red and green light, removing the hair from my legs, buffing my face, and sending electric shocks across my forehead morning, noon, and night for the next four weeks.

Here is what actually happens during the first week: I spend workdays fantasizing about what medical miracles I will perform on myself at night. But I walk through the door each evening so exhausted that I can only halfheartedly shuffle through

a machine that operates by Photopneumatics: IPL (intense pulsed light) therapy combined with a vacuum. "It literally sucks out everything," raves dermatologist Amy Wechsler, M.D., who has just added it to the arsenal of machines in her Manhattan office. As for the Panasonic, it's great in the same way that using Q-tips to clean your ears is great; that is, in how you imagine it's working: the *thwuck-thwuck-thwuck* of the little oil plugs being pulled from their homes, leaving every pore pink and clean and uninhabited. I want so much to believe that the Panasonic Pore Cleanser with Mist is working that I may make some of my own blackheads spontaneously combust with the sheer force of my desire. *(continued >)*

Other than that, I can't tell if it's sucked out a single thing. No matter! I cannot stop vacuuming my nose!

Which brings us to an important point: Many of these machines are essentially prototypes, a first taste of much more to come. Accordingly, doctors are careful to manage patients' expectations. Just as home chemical peels yield skin that is rosy and well exfoliated—though nowhere nearly as exfoliated as what can be achieved through a more highly concentrated in-office peel administered by a licensed aesthetician—the same can be said of the new devices. And not every in-office procedure boasts its own miniaturized counterpart, at least not yet. Some of the most remarkable current services—Fraxel (a fractionalized laser that diminishes lines and improves clarity), Thermage (a radio-frequency treatment that tightens and firms), and plasma therapy (in which activated nitrogen gas permeates skin cells, promoting collagen production

follicle, disrupting the communication between the cells that make hair grow. It feels warm, but the “No pain!” claim is true. Sort of. There is a strange sensation whenever the coil zaps a hair and the heat zings through the shaft below the skin, and it feels rough to buff off the remaining fried hairs. One particularly pesky hair, emerging from a teensy mole on my forearm, is stubborn. I go over and over it, finally killing it but also making the mole turn a funny color and sting slightly. Also, the No!No! smells awful. “That’s exactly the smell you get with laser treatment,” Dinkes assures me. But laser treatment in a doctor’s office is different from filling your home with the aroma of barbecued leg hair every morning before work. Hair grows back in a day or two, getting noticeably less dense after three or four months of regular use. “It’s a process, not a miracle,” Dinkes says carefully. “It’s not instant gratification. But it works.”

Airan wrinkles her nose when I describe the No!No! “Laser hair removal is very

*The ClearWave pamphlet informs me that
“this product may cause interference with radios or devices
that use a wireless remote, such as televisions”*

and helping undo sun damage and wrinkles, producing results similar to old-fashioned dermabrasion, without the harrowing aftermath)—are all a long way from being available for personal use. To take these kinds of technologies home would be akin to performing a do-it-yourself face-lift. Yee-ouch! For now, the devices available to the ambitious age-defying homebody err more toward the conservative (good thing when you're taking your body and face into your own hands). They don't claim to work miracles, necessarily, but they do promise results. Whether or not the Panasonic is there yet, Wechsler at least is optimistic, brightly telling me that she can certainly see vacuum technology being tweaked for effective out-of-office use in the future.

Next up from my box of ticks: the oddly monikered No!No! (No hair! No pain! No better idea for a product name!) hair-removal system. The No!No! is \$250 at Sephora and is touted as a painless route to eventual eradication of body hair. I visit Adam

effective,” she points out, noting that the in-office version can permanently rid one of 80 to 90 percent of hair. I argue that for those of us for whom laser treatment is prohibitively expensive (final results require four to six mildly painful sessions, at an average of \$1,000 each, spaced four weeks apart), \$250 for a permanent decrease could be a democratizing option. One of my fondest aesthetic wishes involves the permanent removal of hair, so I give the No!No! another try. But faced with the reality of burning and buffing three times a week, I last two more times before reaching for my Mach3.

Clear Wave, a twelve-by-eighteen-inch screen made by Verilux and sold at Bliss (\$199), features two vertical sets of red and blue lights that are supposed to clear up acne and reduce inflammation. The pamphlet informs me, “This product may cause interference with radios, cordless telephones, or devices that use a wireless remote control, such as televisions.” It gives me pause to apply to my face a machine that might short out my microwave. But the memory of GentleWaves (whose light technology has inspired this screen, after all) spurs me forward. I turn on ClearWave and don goggles that make the red and blue lights green and yellow. Groovy. Then I sit. For fifteen minutes. Turning my face, rotisserie-chicken-style, to make sure every angle gets exposed to the light. When the time goes off, I have a splitting headache and it's impossible to tell if the session has done anything to my skin. According to the instructions, “a fifteen-minute session daily for eight to twelve weeks should produce the desired results.”

That's a long time to see a difference—longer than the less patient among us might prefer—but that's the reality of many of these new contraptions. Results are cumulative (as they are with GentleWaves, Fraxel, and Thermage), and to be safe enough for home use, DIY devices are naturally less powerful than their supercharged cousins, which are wielded by experts for a reason. Dermatologist Fredric Brandt, M.D., calls the future of home LED technology “promising,” noting, “It's not dependent on operator technique. You just sit in front of it and let the light pulse. They're not going to have the dramatic hit of going to the office, but they may have some benefit. Time will tell.”

Of the other home light devices now available, I become especially fond of the Quasar SP with SequePulse (\$1,849), a metal wand that boasts NASA-grade components and uses red and infrared light to purportedly rid the face of age spots, hyperpigmentation, acne, rosacea, and fine lines. (there is also a junior version, the Baby Quasar, for \$449.) After just a couple of uses, I am certain that I notice tightening under my eyes, a diminishment in fine lines. But aside from looking smoother and tighter, my face is also stinging slightly. My skin looks juicy and plump, but it feels tired.

Dermatologist Patricia Wexler, M.D., doesn't think the new at-home machines are going to put her out of business anytime soon, “but they're good for people who can't afford the price tag of office treatment,” she says. “not everyone can afford plan A, so I believe it's good to have plan Bs.”

Good plan Bs aren't simply replacements for their more powerful in-office counterparts; they can also function as their boon companions, working as stopgap measures between appointments. Sure, hand-held light-therapy machines may not yet (or ever) eradicate wrinkles and uneven skin tone with the oomph of their relatives at the doctor's office, but a good one, used regularly, could help keep things at bay. Face brushes that keep skin exfoliated and hair removers that decrease density over time are certainly improvements on doing nothing but waiting for the next facial or waxing appointment.

And don't forget: this is just the beginning. “Satellite technology used to be available only to the military.” Points out Dinkes, “and now you have satellite in your care. This is technology being brought back to the patients.” Just consider the fact that while my precious GentleWaves remains an in-office-only miracle solution for now, the company is working on a home version currently undergoing FDA trials. Wexler says she hopes they can reproduce the technology. “It would be a nice thing for people to have,” she says. No kidding.



Desperate Housewife

DIY gadgets—from the utterly practical to the over-the-top—give new meaning to multitasking. Dress, Proenza Schouler. Hair, Julien d'Ys; makeup, Fulvia Farolfi for Chanel. Set design, Andrea Stanley at the Wall Group. Sittings Editor: Phyllis Posnick.

Dinkes, the COO of Sadick Dermatology, which has put its muscle behind the No!No! It is, he explains, the first example of an army of such at-home devices scheduled to storm department-store shelves within the next year. What's different about the No!No! is that it uses heat, not light, to get rid of hair, which means wider efficacy and less burning for people with dark skin and fair hair than laser and light treatments. The No!No!, he tells me, has been used by thousands of people (It's a big hit in South American and Europe, where it's been available for several years), and no one has ever been burned.

Dinkes shows me how to use the No!No! on my inner forearm. It looks like a small electric razor, with two “blades” that push hairs up to a coil that sends heat down the