SCAR TACTICS

In life, scars happen, and they can become an unwanted yet permanent part of our appearance. Luckily, scar-reducing treatments are available. We’ve enlisted the help of two professionals to guide us through them.

BY BONNIE STARING

NO TWO SCARS ARE ALIKE
Raised, thickened scars occur when the body’s healing process produces excess collagen. In other cases, scars appear as lighter or darker marks on the skin or, in the case of “box car” acne scars, sunken areas.

For new scars, timing is everything. “You used to wait a year before you started a laser treatment, but we know now that it’s better to heal compromised skin when it’s still in the healing phase,” says Toronto dermatologist Dr. Lisa Kellett, MD, FRCPC, DABD.

Your prescribed regimen may include more than one type of laser or treatment. “It can take more than one approach to reduce a scar or multiple scars’ appearances,” says Dr. Adam Mamelak, MD, FRCPC, FAAD, a dual-board certified dermatologist practicing in Ottawa and Austin, Texas. “Go to someone who is familiar with the different modalities, so he or she can determine the best treatments for you.”

TOPICAL TREATMENTS
Post-surgery scar-management therapy may include a topical silicone treatment to keep the area hydrated and protected, which reduces the likelihood of raised or abnormal scarring.

Easy to use and inexpensive, topical treatments might not be as effective as injections or lasers on older scars. “If the scar is thick, often the gel won’t penetrate deep enough to treat the bulk of the scar tissue,” explains Dr. Mamelak. “Ointments can be used to ‘fine-tune’ remaining scar tissue once the main treatment is complete.”

SCAR PREVENTION TIPS
Even if you don’t have any scars you want treated yet, there are things you can do to make sure your next wound or incision doesn’t result in an unsightly scar.

1 KEEP WOUNDS MOIST
Apply an antibiotic ointment or petroleum jelly twice a day and keep the area covered. “If the wound dries out, all the new skin cells die,” explains Dr. Kellett. “When new skin cells die, it slows down the healing process.”

2 BE LAZY “This is the only time you’re ever going to hear a doctor you tell this, but it’s true,” explains Dr. Mamelak. “The less movement in the area where there’s a scar, the better it heals.”

3 DON’T PICK Maintain a hands-off policy with wounds and scabs. Don’t touch, rub or pick—you can increase your risk of scarring.
ELEVATE BODY

**MEDERMA SCAR GEL**
Made from a botanical extract, this gel can be used on freshly healed wounds and old scars to improve their texture and appearance ($20, at drug stores).

**KELO-COTE**
The silicon dioxide in this ointment stays dry on the surface and will not transfer onto clothing while protecting the area ($50, at Shoppers Drug Mart or doctors’ offices).

**NEW GEL+**
Comprised of 100 per cent medical-grade silicone gel, this ointment comfortably treats new or old scars and stays in place ($35, anexxamed.com).

**STRATAMED**
This silicone-based gel is applied to fresh wounds to protect compromised skin and create an optimal healing environment ($35 and up, at doctors’ offices).

**LASER TREATMENTS**
“Even with one or two laser treatments, you start to see an improvement,” says Dr. Kellett. “Some patients are fine with a subtle improvement from a few visits, while others want to be very close to perfect, which requires a greater number of treatments,”

**FRACTIONAL LASERS**
“Fractional lasers have revolutionized scar treatment by punching microscopic holes in the scar tissue and essentially breaking it up in the skin,” explains Dr. Mamelak. The laser’s ability to penetrate deeply regenerates collagen and encourages healthy tissue growth.

**BEST FOR:** New, old and deep scars.

**VASCULAR LASERS**
“These lasers target the blood vessels in scar tissue to create less colour contrast between the scar and the surrounding skin,” says Dr. Mamelak. “As well, vascular lasers heat the scar’s thick collagen areas and essentially rearrange them, so that more normal collagen is laid down.”

**BEST FOR:** Reddish, pink and/or raised scars.

**INTENSE PULSED LIGHT (IPL) LASERS**
Dr. Kellett uses an IPL laser, Lumenis One, to blend scars into the surrounding tissue. This treatment is usually performed in a regimen that includes another type of laser treatment.

**BEST FOR:** Blending less noticeable scars.

“The more aggressive the laser treatment, the more downtime you may need,” explains Dr. Mamelak. “You may also require post-procedure care. It’s important to...”
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— DR. MAMELAK, MD, FRCP, FAAD

discuss these issues with your physician before undergoing the procedure and make sure the timing is appropriately planned.

**COST:** $350 to $1,800, depending on type of laser(s) and size of area treated.

**FREQUENCY:** Five to 12 treatments, four to six weeks apart, depending on the patient.

**RESULTS:** Permanent.

**OTHER TREATMENTS**

“You want to treat the scar as best you can, so you use a little bit of the injection, a little bit of the laser,” says Dr. Kellett. “And every time the patient comes in, it’s a little bit different, depending on how the scar is doing. You constantly reevaluate the patient and the treatment.”

**STEROID INJECTIONS**

These prevent a new scar from increasing in size or developing a thicker texture. “We’ll do the injection at the same time as surgery or even immediately post-operatively to make sure the wound heals well,” explains Dr. Mamelak. For existing scars, these injections can help flatten and lessen their appearance.

**COST:** $175 and up.

**FREQUENCY:** Depends on the size and severity of the scar.

**RESULTS:** Permanent.

**CHEMICAL PEELS**

Epidermal peels are primarily used to remove superficial layers of the skin, and the results aren’t quite as effective as steroid injections or laser treatments. “Chemical peels can help improve discoloration on the skin left by acne scarring,” says Dr. Mamelak.

**COST:** $150 and up.

**FREQUENCY:** Depends on the size and severity of the scar.

**RESULTS:** Last a year or more.

**ONE THING IS CLEAR:** there isn’t a one-time “magic bullet” treatment for scars, but with a little patience you can achieve desirable, permanent results.