

Relaxing & Beautifying

Do your homework before going to medical spa

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Gentle instrumental tunes stream through the speakers at Reflections Med Spas in Coeur d'Alene. A waterfall bubbles. There's soft lighting and a cozy waiting room with overstuffed couches and cups of hot tea on the end tables.

You can get a facial here, or a makeup consultation, just like at any other tony spa.

But you can also have your face blasted with a high-powered laser. Or you can have your varicose veins removed by a surgeon.

Reflections Med Spas is part of the hottest trend in spas — the medical spa.

Medical spas combine all the luxury of a traditional spa with cosmetic procedures such as laser hair removal, vein therapy and Botox injections.

"It is growing by leaps and bounds," says Hannelore Leavy, who founded the New Jersey-based International Medical Spa Association in 2002. "Everyone wants to jump on the wagon."

Medical spas are not regulated nationally, so there's no definitive way of tracking the growth. But Leavy estimates there are about 1,500 medical spas in this country, up from about 100 in 2002.

About half a dozen med spas operate in Eastern Washington and North Idaho, most of them opening in the past couple of years. A medical spa is part of the multimillion-dollar remodeling plans for the Coeur d'Alene Resort.

Some med spas are affiliated with doctors' offices, and others are run largely by aestheticians.

Right now, Washington has no rules specifically governing medical spas, though the state Department of Health is working on guidelines concerning the use of laser treatments, department spokeswoman Deanna Whitman says. Under Washington rules, injections such as Botox can be given only by someone with a health-care provider license, Whitman says.

Idaho guidelines say that high-powered lasers should be used only under a physician's guidance. Laser hair removal, however, can be done without a doctor's supervision, says Mary Leonard, associate director of the Idaho Board of Medicine.

But these are just state recommendations, not laws, Leonard emphasizes. And that means much responsibility falls to the consumer to find well-trained practitioners at medical spas, she says.

"They're not regulated by any other entity," she says. "That's kind of the problem."

Says Leavy: "It means the consumer needs to be very vigilant."

Ask the owner to see certification that all therapists are trained and certified, she says.

"If the person cannot produce that or refuses to show it to you, I would recommend to the person to walk out."

Drs. Kevin Johnson and John Lundeby, two general and vascular surgeons from Coeur d'Alene, opened Reflections Med Spas last April.

The two thought it was important to have trained doctors doing all of the spa's medical procedures.

"I would want a physician shooting a laser at my face," Johnson says.

While clinical expertise is important, patients undergoing these procedures don't want to feel like they're in a clinical setting, he and others say. Who wants to watch the clock tick by in a cramped waiting room, when you're spending thousands of dollars out-of-pocket on an elective procedure?

"Since you're going to pay for it anyway, why should you be in a doctor's office if you can get the same treatment and a lot more attention," Leavy says. "Why go and sit in the doctor's office with other sick people if you can do it in a much easier and relaxed way?"

Beaute Vitale in Spokane is decorated in soft colors. You won't see any red biohazard boxes on the walls. And patients are treated to hot towels and heated beds.

But just upstairs from the spa portion is the medical office of plastic surgeon Dr. Carol Hathaway, who also oversees the med spa.

Patients who do not need or want a full face lift can go to the spa for laser resurfacing, spider vein reduction, Botox injections and other services.

"I think we're a nation obsessed with looking like movie stars," says Chris Meston, an aesthetician at Beaute Vitale. "Everyone can't afford to jump into plastic surgery, and not everybody really needs plastic surgery."

But the med spa treatments come with a steep price tag.

Three sessions of laser hair removal on the lower legs at Beaute Vitale runs \$1,100, Meston says. A package of five laser "facials" to even pigmentation and tighten skin costs \$2,250.

Karen Zimmerman, a 62-year-old Hayden, Idaho, resident, had been so embarrassed about the lack of elasticity in the skin on her neck that she's mostly worn turtlenecks for the past several years.

So last August, on her birthday, she had her first laser treatment at Reflections Med Spa. She's had three more Titan Tissue Tightening sessions on her face and neck since then.

"I noticed a difference before I left the office the first time," Zimmerman says.

During each session, Zimmerman reclines in a chair. Titanium goggles guard her eyes, and her hair is swept back. Towels cover her upper body so the cooling gel doesn't get on her clothes.

With a white pencil, Johnson marks the areas on her face to be treated.

Each full-face treatment costs \$1,500; a package of three sessions runs \$3,000.

Since the technology is so new, there is no long-term guarantee on how long the results will last, Johnson says. But patients can expect the results to last upward of two years, he says.

Johnson presses what looks like a small vacuum-cleaner attachment to Zimmerman's face. The device glows blue for an instant and then casts a hot orange light on her skin. Each pulse — and she had 59 of them in her most-recent treatment — feels like a little sting, she says.

Since the laser quickly cools the skin before and after heating it, there is no redness or swelling. Zimmerman planned to head to work right after a laser session last week.

Grabbing her cup of hot tea after her treatment, Zimmerman said she's not opposed to getting a face lift at some point.

"I just wanted something done without having to take a month off work and spend \$12,000," she says.

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