



Beam Me Up, Dentist!

Ditch the drone and discomfort of drills — lasers can fix teeth, too

When folks say they hate going to the dentist, it's not because they have any real beef with the person in the white coat. He or she's not trying to cause pain (hopefully).

Drills, on the other hand are not so well-meaning. Cold steel had better watch out, though, because the mouth industry has been working for decades to replace drills with laser beams.

If that sounds like an idea straight out of science fiction, well, for a long time it was. "The first ones ended up cooking teeth, and if you aimed them across the room, you'd take out someone's eye," says Lawrence Singer of DC Smiles (202-912-9200; Desmiles.com).

But about 10 years ago, the FDA approved a technology combining lasers with water for a tool that actually works — and won't burn through a cheek. The most popular brand in dentist offices today is Waterlase MD (pictured).

If you've never heard of it, that's because it's still a rare find — only about 5 percent of dentists use lasers like Waterlase, says its manufacturer, Biolase. It's used in just a handful of D.C.-

area dental offices (see WaterlaseDentistry.com to find them).

Singer has been a fan since he jumped on the bandwagon two years ago. "It can do hard tissue [bone, teeth] or soft tissue [gums], and it's a lot safer than a scalpel or drill. It's like a pinpoint," says Singer. He can see why Waterlase has been slow to catch on, however: "It's \$80,000, and you can outfit a modest dentist office for that."

Patients might feel that's a small price to pay for the reduced

side effects. Numbing isn't required for many jobs, as the beam has an anesthetic effect. It sterilizes, too, which wards off complications. Squeamish? The laser causes much less bleeding than metal tools as it sculpts gums, cuts around wisdom teeth or employs any of its other skills. The thing can even instantly blast away a cold sore.

The main drawback is time — because the beam is so precise, it takes a while to carve and cut. Singer uses his lasers in conjunction with conventional tools for certain procedures, such as sterilizing edges after digging out something big.

Cavities are a cinch for lasers, as Erica Mintzer discovered when her 5-year-old son Ryan needed five fillings. His dentist recommended bringing in an anesthesiologist to knock him out. For a second opinion, she took Ryan to Singer, who said that would be unnecessary.

"I don't think there was any pain at all," says Mintzer, who watched TV with Ryan during the roughly one-hour procedure. "It was a little annoying, but certainly better than drilling." Now Mom has an appointment next week to take out her own cavity, laser-style.

Singer wishes he were so lucky. He has a cavity, but has been waiting to get it fixed. "I hate getting that shot," he says. "But I have to train someone to use this on me."



Waterlase has a touch-sensitive screen. So, with a tap, it's ready to zap.

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