

6 things patients should know about red light therapy

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As a dermatologist, Margaretta Masse, MD, has seen patients pursue all types of quick fixes to improve their skin. That includes red light therapy—a type of treatment where wavelengths of light are deployed through masks, blankets and even saunas.

The extent to which people are receiving red light therapy, though, stretches far beyond the skin. Some people believe it helps with hair loss. Others think it can ease joint pain.

On [the latest episode](#) of the AMA podcast “Health vs. Hype,” Dr. Masse, medical director of dermatology in the Manhattan division of Northwell Health in New York City, confirmed that there are benefits to red light therapy. She did, however, quickly caution that it is not a miracle cure.

"I don't want anybody to leave this podcast thinking that your standard red light mask is going to have any effect on your nervous system or your joint inflammation," she said. "It does not penetrate anywhere near to those depths."

"[Health vs. Hype](#)"—produced in partnership with iHeartRadio—takes on medical misinformation, viral health trends, DIY medicine, and common health myths to help listeners understand what's real, what's risky, and what's backed by science. Host Trace Dominguez fact-checks popular health claims, explains how medical misinformation spreads, and reveals the real-world consequences of getting it wrong.

[Northwell Health](#) is part of the [AMA Health System Member Program](#) that provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

Red light therapy can produce more collagen

The therapy "really turns on genes that make more collagen," Dr. Masse said. "They can use an ultrasound, for example, to measure the density of your collagen, and then this profilometry where they literally go and measure the depth of your wrinkles. That helps quantify those changes in collagen."

"What's harder to gauge is scientifically measured changes enough to see a clinical change when you're actually looking in the mirror," she said. "The truth is there is a difference on a microscopic level, but not everybody will feel that there's a clinical difference as well."

Some red light therapy masks also feature blue light

"Blue light has a much shorter wavelength and is even more superficial in how it penetrates, so it really just targets your epidermis—that top-most layer of skin, and it targets something different," Dr. Masse said. "It targets porphyrins, and those are molecules that are made by the bacteria that cause acne on our skin. When blue light hits those porphyrins, it makes something called reactive oxygen species, and those are toxic to the bacteria on our skin. And so there's less bacteria, then there's less acne. Whereas you have a lot of indications for red light, blue light is predominantly right now being used for acne-specific treatment."

Red light therapy can help with some hair loss

"We have really good data for androgenetic alopecia, which is a specific type of hair loss," Dr. Masse said. "A misconception is that it's great for all types of hair loss, and we just don't have that data. We have data for androgenetic, which is female or male pattern hair loss. It shifts your hair from the kind of static phase or the shedding phase to the growth phase, or what we call the anagen phase. So more hair is entering that growth phase and growing."

Red light therapy is safe for most people

"It's very safe," Dr. Masse said. "The most common side effects we see are a little bit of temporary redness or maybe a little bit of mild, temporary skin pain."

"One population that really should be a little bit more cautious about it are skin-of-color patients, and we know that they are at higher risk—when using these masks specifically—of redness that persists, permanent discoloration, or even blistering," she said. For patients of color, Dr. Masse recommended "starting with lower, shorter treatment times, and then working up as you can tolerate slowly."

Red light therapy can help some cancer patients

"We know that one of the biggest benefits of red light therapy that has been documented is for something called mucositis, which is severe inflammation of the mucosal lining of your GI tract, mouth included," Dr. Masse said. "A lot of these world-known cancer centers will actually have red light treatments for people who have really inflamed mouths—oral mucositis—just to help them deal with some of the side effects of chemotherapy."

"Most people don't use it for oral inflammation," she said, "but the data points to the fact that it probably does work."

Red light therapy doesn't replace basic care

It's important for patients to understand that this therapy is "meant to be an adjunct treatment to other things that you're doing," Dr. Masse said. "Probably at least a few times a month I'll have an acne patient come into my clinic, and they'll say, 'You know, I don't wash my face consistently twice a day every day, but should I get this mask?' I just want to say, 'Well, please, let's commit to washing your face first. I promise you that will give you better results.'"

Red light therapy, she said, is not a "monotherapy" for skin care.

"You can compare it directly to any of the other products out there, because it's not meant to replace them. It's not meant to do what those other products do. It's meant to work in tandem with them," Dr. Masse said. "There are definitely some proven benefits, but at the same time, it just shouldn't be the only thing that you're doing."