





Having a latte along with a laser treatment or facial fillers at an Instagram-ready med spa is an indulgence, which is why these facilities are more popular than ever. **But while many are safe, some wrinkles remain.**

THE ugly truth

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE LINGEMAN

In the fall of 2023,

a distraught young woman showed up at the office of New York City–based dermatologist Nkem Ugonabo, M.D., M.P.H. She'd just had laser hair removal at a med spa—one of more than 11,000 glammed-up aesthetic medical center-day spa hybrids across the U.S. that offer cosmetic and medical procedures ranging from facial fillers and chemical peels to tattoo removal and body contouring.

As the laser operator had directed pulses of intense heat into her cheeks, chin, and upper-lip area, she'd been shocked by how painful it felt in comparison to the last time she'd had it done, so she'd spoken up. “But her concerns were brushed off, and unfortunately she went home to find her face covered in burns,” says Dr. Ugonabo, an assistant professor of dermatology at Albert Einstein College of Medicine with advanced training in cosmetic dermatology and lasers.

Dr. Ugonabo treated the burns, inflammation, and hyperpigmentation caused by the improperly wielded laser and later restarted the process with the correct laser using the proper settings.

“The issue,” Dr. Ugonabo says, “is that there is not much regulation of med spas, and increasingly some are offering medical and cosmetic procedures by people who are inadequately trained or inadequately supervised.” As she told her Instagram followers, laser treatments can be “life-changing when used appropriately,” but they “are medical treatments and should be treated as such.”

That med spa GLOW

Often with luxe vibes (fresh flowers, retro chandeliers) and with prices and wait times that can be less than those of dermatology practices, in the U.S. med spas are a \$15 billion industry. “On their social media accounts you’ll usually see a pretty practitioner in a glamorized office,” says Chicago-based board-certified dermatologist Emily Rubenstein, D.O. Posts show impressive before-and-after pics of waists whittled during a patient’s lunch break and private “Tox parties” where friends are injected with Botox as they sip rosé. (Botox, a botulinum toxin, temporarily relaxes muscles to make skin wrinkle-free.)

To be clear, at a med spa you’re a patient, not a client. “Medical spas are medical practices,” says Renee Coover, general counsel for Advanced MedAesthetic Partners, Inc., which improves and scales aesthetic medical practices. There may be a neon “Hey babe, nice brows” sign in the lobby, but many of



the services are considered medical.

That said, even the American Med Spa Association points out that the service offered by med spas often “blurs the line between medical and spa treatments.” Thanks to their one-stop-shop appeal—freeze your fat *and* plump your pout *and* erase your brown spots—and the diminishing stigma of aesthetic

procedures, med spas are more popular than ever, having exploded by about 60% since 2020. In fact, Dr. Rubenstein says that services like lip fillers and photofacials—technical procedures that just 15 years ago were almost solely the purview of doctors—have become so synonymous with med spas that she’s had patients say, “Oh, I didn’t know

doctors did cosmetics.” “They think we just check for skin cancer,” she says.

Complications ABOUND

But behind the lavender medical gloves and “My bunny lines are gone!” TikTok

reviews, there are “a lot of Wild West situations,” says Dr. Rubenstein, who sees patients at a private dermatology practice and serves as medical director for a chain of laser med spas.

In a recent American Society for Dermatologic Surgery member survey, the majority of respondents—



all of whom were board-certified dermatologists—said that of all cosmetic complications they had treated in the prior two years, between 61% and 100% had been attributable to medical spas. The most common issues: burns, discoloration, and misplacement of facial filler and other products. The researchers who conducted the survey aren't sure of the reason—it may be partly because many procedures at med spas are performed by people who don't have medical licenses and sometimes there isn't a medical doctor on the premises to supervise.

Problems don't stem only from personnel issues, though. It's possible that in attempting to make money some med spas may cut corners on the products they purchase and/or their cleanliness practices. For instance, in December 2023, the FDA warned of adverse reactions among med spa customers who had received unapproved fat-dissolving injections. Underscoring the message: a photo of a 53-year-old woman, her upper arms covered with angry red nodules resembling cigarette burns. The ulcers were caused by dangerous bacteria that had entered her system during one such med spa procedure.

Perhaps even more disturbing, at least five cases of HIV infection have been linked with procedures known as “vampire facials” performed at an Albuquerque med spa. During these widely performed facials, a person's blood is drawn and spun in a centrifuge to separate out the platelet-rich plasma,

then reintroduced into their face via microscopic needle pricks.

And in the spring of 2024, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that 22 women in 11 states had developed symptoms of botulism, a rare but potentially deadly illness that causes muscle weakness and breathing difficulties. The patients had recently received “counterfeit or mishandled” botulinum toxin injections, either from “unlicensed or untrained individuals” or in “non-health care settings,” such as med spas, says CDC senior botulism epidemiologist Michelle Waltenburg, D.V.M., M.P.H.

Confounding rules and REGULATIONS

Of course complications can and do occur even in the most experienced dermatologists' offices, and there are risks with any cosmetic procedure. But critics say the lack of federal oversight of med spas has fostered an environment in which it's hard to know whether the person using a powerful laser beam to destroy the outer layer of your skin (to expose a glowing under-layer) is certified to do so.

Sara Hogan, M.D., an assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences in Washington, DC, and coauthor of a recent *Dermatologic Surgery* paper called “Who Is Holding the Syringe?”,

says it's not uncommon for med spa patients to come to her with unsatisfactory procedure results or complications: "When asked, these patients often do not know the credentials of the person who performed the procedure or the type of product or device used." When she and her colleagues investigated 127 Midwestern med spas, they found that "most of the cosmetic procedures offered...were performed by nonphysician providers."

Usually this is perfectly legal—rules and regulations defined by state boards specify who can own med spas and perform med spa procedures. In most states, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and registered nurses are cleared to treat patients as long as they're properly trained and supervised by a physician, but training requirements vary. For example, certified advanced aestheticians have the go-ahead to perform laser hair removal at a med spa in Oregon, but not in New York. This creates "a hodgepodge of rules and regulations" that's confusing and hard to comprehend, Coover says.

Also, the definition of "physician supervision" varies widely. In some states, proper supervision means the doctor can be off-site "as long as the physician is reachable by phone or email and an appropriate provider performed a patient good faith exam and provided treatment," explains Coover. (A good faith exam is a clinical evaluation by a qualified physician, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant who determines the treatment plan

prior to any medical service and communicates the plan to staff members who have been properly trained in the procedure they'll be performing.)

But, says Dr. Ugonabo, "if something were to go awry, such as a vascular occlusion" (a blood flow blockage that can occur if a filler is inadvertently injected into a blood vessel), it can lead to scarring, disfigurement, and tissue death. "I worry that some of these spas may not be able to respond quickly, which ultimately leads to patient harm," she adds. In one tragic case, a woman died of sudden cardiac arrest at a med spa last year after an IV vitamin and electrolyte infusion; reportedly the supervising doctor was more than an hour away when the patient lost consciousness.

In addition to all this, a surprising number of the physician supervisors at med spas hail from "noncore aesthetic specialties," meaning fields such as pediatrics, gynecology, and emergency room medicine, not dermatology or plastic surgery. That's not to say they don't have experience and skill in cosmetic medical procedures, but it may be the difference between "someone who's taken a weekend course versus someone who has completed a four-year residency," Dr. Rubenstein says.

Rarely, supervising doctors are "medical directors in name only," says Dr. Hogan. They're financially compensated for lending their names and medical licenses to med spas so they can meet state or licensing agency requirements for physician supervision. Called ghost

doctors, “they may or may not be—but often are not—on-site or involved in day-to-day operations,” says Dr. Hogan.

Not all med spas ARE BAD

Do safe, rule-following med spas exist? Absolutely, says Dr. Hogan. The ideal scenario, she says, includes a good faith exam before any medical procedure. Before you consent to medical services without one, warning bells should sound.

Even the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS), which represents more than 92% of board-certified plastic surgeons, acknowledges that med spas can be safe places to receive certain services. The organization gives the green light to botulinum toxins and fillers from licensed med spas with accredited staff but a yellow light to device-based procedures such as laser treatments, skin tightening, and cellulite reduction. “Check that the provider is properly trained to use the specific device and able to treat any complications that arise, including severe skin burns and skin pigment complications,” says ASPS patient safety chair Josef Hadeed, M.D. Don’t do anything requiring an incision or sedation at a med spa.

Finally, if like Dr. Ugonabo’s patient you find yourself injured by a med spa treatment, seek help as soon as possible to minimize the damage. In a perfect world every person with a laser or a syringe would be trained in how to use it appropriately, Dr. Ugonabo says, “but unfortunately that is not the case.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN BOOKING AN APPOINTMENT

>> WHO WILL BE WORKING ON ME?

Find out who will perform any procedure and whether they’re qualified and licensed to do so. Research them beforehand, comparing their qualifications with what AmSpa lists on americanmedspa.org.

>> HOW MANY TIMES HAVE THEY DONE THIS?

The more, the better. The ASPS also suggests requesting before-and-after pics of previous patients. Ask about follow-up protocol and what complications of the procedure the practitioner has seen.

>> WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE SUPERVISING PHYSICIAN?

A good med spa will have a doctor available 24 hours a day to manage complications from even minor procedures, says Dr. Hadeed. That doctor should be reachable by phone at all times, but it’s even better if they are in the office during normal business hours. Ask if this physician will be your contact should you think you’re experiencing a complication.