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THE TIMES

How to improve the appearance of varicose veins

High-tech tweakments, by Jennifer George

Jennifer George

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When it comes to aesthetics, veins are one of the trickiest parts of the body with which to deal. Unlike jowls and love-handles, veins are lifelines. Which means we only try our best to improve their appearance.

Because varicose veins are the most common complaint, we'll start there. Pretty much anyone can get them – even if you've never crossed your legs in your life. Genetics, pregnancy or weight gain can make veins twist and swell, so that they emerge as lumpy worms, mainly on the lower legs. In the past the only way to get rid of them was an invasive surgery rather terrifyingly called vein stripping – which required general anaesthetic and up to four weeks of recovery. Thankfully, most cases today can be treated using a laser procedure, known as EVLA (endovenous laser ablation).

The procedure is the preferred technique of Constantinos Kyriakides, a consultant vascular surgeon at the Private Clinic on Harley Street in London, because it takes only 30 minutes, is viable for most patients and the results are immediate. "Plus it leaves very low risk of recurrence," he says. The procedure involves inserting a tiny laser into the vein (under local anaesthetic), which fires heat into the vein and is slowly pulled out, shrinking and sealing the vein as it goes. Results, he says, can be seen in six weeks, "when any minor bruising has cleared". Best of all, he adds, once the veins have been put out of service in this way, other deeper veins will take over the blood circulation in the area.

A subtler but stubborn sister of the varicose vein is the thread vein: a series of burst capillaries that show up like scarlet spider webs on the skin, and can end up looking like a bruise. Thankfully, these too can be treated if spotted early. At Mallucci London they use an Elite laser to target the capillaries, cauterising them and turning them into jelly. It's not painful – the sensation is like little flicks on the skin – and each area takes about 30 minutes. The result is usually extremely effective and the veins shrink away almost immediately, although to achieve a completely clear surface you'll need between three and five sessions, and a few weeks for the body to heal.

Veins on the face are trickier to deal with – primarily because "the skin on the face is thinner, so the capillaries are more superficial and visible", says Dr Alexis Granite, a dermatologist based at Sarah Chapman's clinic. Although Granite sees them most commonly around the nose and cheeks – the result of hard nose-blowing, aggressive skincare regimes, UV exposure and ageing – she can make quick work of them in the clinic, using an IPL (intense pulse light) device. The laser, she says, homes in on the red haemoglobin in the vessels, collapsing it "until it is broken down and then disappears". The feeling is of a gentle ping and the results are long-lasting. A bonus, she adds, is that IPL helps with pigmentation control and collagen stimulation. "So while we're there, the whole face can get a little treat."

EVLA treatment at the Private Clinic, from £2,350, theprivateclinic.co.uk ; Elite Laser at the Mallucci Clinic, from £150, mallucci-london.com ; facial treatment including IPL with Dr Alexis Granite, from £400, sarahchapman.com

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