

OFF THE GRID

THE SKIN-TIGHTENING POTENTIAL OF A NOVEL ULTRASONIC DEVICE IS RESHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE FACE.

With fat-melting lasers and skin-resurfacing fractional CO₂ treatments emerging as formidable antiaging weaponry in recent years, who hasn't wondered, if only for a moment, whether the surgical face-lift might one day be obsolete? We may not be there yet, but the arrival of Ulthera—a new cosmetic device that targets sagging skin at the muscular level—is making it that much easier to imagine a world in which hooded lids, falling cheeks, and lazy jaw lines can be treated without a single incision.

Unique in its abilities to visibly lift and tighten skin, Ulthera's technology revolves around focused ultrasound energy, a modality used in medicine to treat kidney stones and uterine fibroids thanks to its far-reaching wavelengths. It works like this: Thermal energy bypasses the upper layers of the skin (those conventionally targeted by Fraxel and Thermage), safely heating the underlying connective tissue that lines the facial muscles. That tissue contracts, resulting in an immediate tightening and, ultimately, a tangible lift. More commonly known as the SMAS, "it's the same layer of tissue we pull tighter in a face-lift," says Matthew White, M.D., a plastic surgeon at NYU Langone Medical Center and one of the key researchers behind the development of Ulthera at Massachusetts General Hospital in the mid-2000s. In an attempt to target multiple layers of tissue, doctors then set the device to a shallower depth and make a second pass with the hand piece, this time intentionally aiming its heat at the



FLASH FORWARD
ULTHERA GIVES NEW DIMENSION TO NONINVASIVE ANTIAGING TECHNOLOGY. PHOTOGRAPHED BY IRVING PENN, VOGUE, MAY 2003.

skin's upper layers in order to stimulate line-smoothing collagen production.

"I call it the Spanx effect," says Manhattan dermatologist Patricia Wexler, M.D., who has been using Ulthera in her practice. "The cheeks lift back toward their apple position; the jaw line tightens; the brow no longer sags. We're actually resculpting the face. Most of my patients see an immediate result before they leave the office and a secondary one a few months later as new collagen continues to form."

Plastic surgeons across the board are quick to stress that "Ultherapy" isn't a replacement for a face-lift—only the knife, after all, can yield truly significant results for tissue of a certain laxity—but they are deeply excited about its current and future applications. "Suddenly we're talking about treating the skin on multiple levels without surgery," New York City plastic surgeon Haideh Hirmand, M.D., says of Ultherapy's three-dimensional scaffolding effect on loose skin, which becomes increasingly noticeable past the age of 40. It's the difference, she explains, "between pulling the skin during a face-lift, which we know doesn't last, and pulling the muscle beneath it." For now, most experts agree that the device fills a long-vacant gap in their current cosmetic arsenal. "Maybe you're not ready for surgery

yet, or maybe you're getting fillers and Botox but you still need a little more in the direction of up," says Wexler. "I'm finding it's wonderful for the lines along the upper lip that no injectable can treat." In fact, those secondary skin-tightening properties already have her dreaming of its potential effects below the neck, in areas like "the loose skin on the underside of the arms, the crepey skin on the chest, even the wrinkly areas on the knees and elbows."

It takes about one hour to complete the entire face and neck, but because Ultherapy is performed using ultrasonic imaging (another first for its class of cosmetic devices), doctors can view each layer of skin and muscle as they work, resulting in greater precision and a heightened safety profile. Still, as with any novel technology, there are potential risks and side effects. "There can be some bruising, swelling, and a feeling of tightness in the days after the procedure," says Wexler, who adds that while she hasn't seen any incidents of burning, "it's theoretically possible" with any thermal-energy device.

If anything, Ultherapy's greatest drawback may be the pain factor, which ranges from a hot prickling sensation to short but intense bursts of discomfort. "You can feel it," says Wexler. But, she adds wryly, "I find there's little that can't be overcome by visualizing a great-looking face."
—CATHERINE PIERCY *health* >230